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FIGURATIONS OF THE MIME

BETWEEN IMITATION AND PRODUCTION IN DERRIDA, LACOUE-LABARTHE AND IRIGARAY

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FIGURATIONS OF THE MIME

Between Imitation and Production in Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray

Acknowledgements 3
The Stage Setup 7
Introduction 13

Chapter 1: Mime and Mimodrama: Derrida's Deconstruction of Mimesis in "The Double Session" 35

1. Introduction 35
2. There is No Imitation: The Mime Imitates Nothing 40
    2.1 "Pierrot Murderer of his Wife" and the Evocation of Opposites 40
    2.2 Mime as Blank Page and the Idea of the Phantom 43
3. Figurations of the Mime 46
    3.1 Figuration No. 1: The Double Inscription of Mimesis 47
    3.2 Figuration No. 2: Setting up a Medium of Fiction 50
4. Conclusion 54

Chapter 2: *Passons au théâtre*: Lacoue-Labarthe and the Miming of the Subject 57

1. Introduction 57
2. Plato and Theatrical Mimesis 64
    2.1 General and Restricted Mimesis 65
    2.2 To Act is to Mime: Fundamental Mimetology 69
    2.3 Purifying Mimesis 72
3. The Paradox of the Mime 74
    3.1 The Mimetic Subject 75
    3.2 Derrida's "Mimetological Machine" 76
    3.3 Diderot's *Paradox* and the Actor's Imaginary Model 78
4. Passive and Productive Mimesis 83
    4.1 The Actor's Illusion 83
    4.2 Man of Sensibility or Disinterested Onlooker? 86
    4.3 Onto-Typology Revisited 90
    4.4 So What About the Theatre? 93
5. Exhibition/Exposition: A Theatre of Sobriety 94
    5.1 Sobriety Excludes Identification as Possession 96
    5.2 *Émoi*: Mimetic Affect and the Weakening of the Subject 100
    5.3 Mime and the Voice 104
6. Conclusion 108

Chapter 3: The Feminine Mime: Luce Irigaray on the Difference of and in the Feminine 111

1. Introduction 111
2. Irigaray Through the Looking Glass 119
    2.1 Mimesis, Play and the "Other Woman" 120
    2.2 Crossing Back Through the Mirrors 122

  2.3 Plato’s Mirror Analogy 129
  2.4 Mirrors and Psychoanalysis 133
3. The Scene of Origin 141
  3.1 The Stage Setup: Plato’s Cave 142
  3.2 Plato’s Cave is a “Topographic Mime” 146
  3.3 *Chora*, Passage, Fluidity 148
  3.4 Plato’s Cave is a Theatre of the Unstable 156
4. The Feminine Scene: Women’s Staging of Fluids and Difference 158
5. Conclusion 162

Coda 165
Bibliography 173

THE STAGE SETUP

In the early 1980s, in an essay entitled "Bye Bye Farewell," for the journal *L'animal*, the French philosopher, literary critic and lesser-known colleague of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, stated the following:

> Something in mimesis, in the very first 'miming', probably went beyond the 'to be seen'. And perhaps this was what explained the astonishing resistance of the theatre at a time when technical speculation should have relegated it to the antique shop long ago.[1] (Lacoue-Labarthe 1983; my translation)

With the second part of the quotation, Lacoue-Labarthe refers to the general disinterest in theatre by French artists, intellectuals, including himself initially, and the related poverty of the cultural and philosophical debate around the aesthetic form of theatre. This was unquestionably a result of the — at the time — outdated, traditional link of classical theatre with representation, which seemed officially doomed after Derrida's famous announcement of "the closure of representation" [*la clôture de la représentation*] in one of his talks about the avant-gardist playwright Antonin Artaud during an international theatre festival in Parma in 1966 (Derrida 1976; 1978b).[2] Nonetheless, as Lacoue-Labarthe points out, at the same time, theatre had not succumbed to "the two-thousand-year history of its philosophical arrest," by which he means the theoretical reduction of theatrical mimesis to painting or the spectacle, which was omnipresent in the Western philosophical tradition (Lacoue-Labarthe 1983; n.d., 103). If theatre would indeed be reducible to the reproductions of the established repertoire theatre, like we do with the paintings of Old Masters, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, then we might as well leave them where they belong: in a museum or worse in an antique shop. But, he continues, this has precisely not been the fate of theatre.

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[1] The title, "the stage set-up," is taken from one of the chapters in Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (2010, 236–57).

[2] His talk was published with the title "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" which appeared in *Writing and Difference*. In this essay, he states: "The theater of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation. [...] This life carries man along with it but is not primarily the life of man. The latter is only a representation of life, and such is the limit—the humanist limit—of the metaphysics of classical theater." (Derrida 1978b, 234)

The reason for this paradox (representation is doomed yet theatre is surprisingly vital), is to be found, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, in the rather unorthodox conception of "miming" [*mimer*], which is as surprising as it is enigmatic. Not only does the word "mime" seem to provide a very narrow definition of theatre (at first sight, the image of a face-painted pantomime comes to mind), but also in terms of its role in post-war French philosophy vis-à-vis the traditional plays of the time: mime and miming do not immediately provide a clear topic of philosophical investigation. Apart from a handful of informative studies, as we will see, in introductory, traditional handbooks of aesthetics and philosophy of art, mime is rarely discussed.[3] Starting from leading views on theatrical mimesis in Western history, such as Plato's condemnation of art and artists in *Republic* or Aristotle's positive development of the art of tragedy in *Poetics*, and their indisputable importance in art and theatre history, mime remains a proverbial and literal phantom figure in the leading aesthetic theories that determine Western thought and art conceptions in contemporary France more specifically.

The question that arises is hence: why does mime suddenly attract the attention of Lacoue-Labarthe and his contemporaries? But before we can attempt to answer this question we have to turn to an underlying, preceding question: what about the philosophical concept of *mimesis*? As we have established, there is generally little interest in the idea of representation in contemporary French thought. This suggests that the term "mimesis" (which, in contrast to mime, has received plenty of attention in philosophy), has also lost its appeal. After all, Plato's original conception of mimesis as secondary copying of reality is a distinctly binary notion: imitation, assimilation, adequation, reproduction, duplication, doubling, mirroring are all words that come to mind when we think of the notion of mimesis and is inextricably linked to such dual oppositions as reality/fiction, original/copy, real/fake, authentic/inauthentic, … Now if there is anything that is being put to the test in French contemporary thought, it is binary thinking. Against this background, it would have been understandable if they had set aside the concept of mimesis altogether. But here too we see something surprising: mimesis does not seem to be entirely absent from the work of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and other related thinkers in France such as the feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray. On the contrary, they show that it is precisely the notion that we cannot avoid. As Irigaray observes, with an eye on Plato's metaphysics: "and yet the world from end to end is organized as *mimêsis*; resemblance is the law" (Irigaray 2010, 149–50). Although the idea of resemblance together with representation is in the philosophical corner of perdition, also with Irigaray, the far-reaching impact of mimesis in Western thought and society seems so strong that they must address the concept heads-on, albeit from a conceptually different angle than a Platonic metaphysics.

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[3] See for example G. Gentile, *The Philosophy of Art* (1972), P. Somville, *Mimesis et art contemporain* (1979), K. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990), G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (2005), N. Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (2006).

If we set aside the classical aesthetics textbooks, separate the notion of theatrical mimesis from visual representation and postpone the metaphysical binary distinctions underlying Plato's concept of mimesis, and turn instead to the so-called French philosophers of difference, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray, we see that their explicit aversion to representation and imitation, goes hand in hand with affirmative reconfigurations of the word "mimesis." This includes the word "mime" but also related notions such as mimicry, simulation, affection, contamination, transformation, and play. With the shift from mimesis as a problem of secondary copying and (re)doubling of a stable, unified, and self-contained world to the intervention in and transformation of the world as well as the self through mimetic enactments (*mimetism*), they bring the notion of mimesis, I want to propose, back into an anthropological realm. Moreover, by reinvesting in the function of the early Greek notion of *mimesthai*, they locate the problem of mimetism and mime at the heart of society and away from the purely aesthetic realm, i.e., the art of representation.

At the same time, Lacoue-Labarthe's statement that mime should be held responsible for the fact that theatre has not died out suggests that we should not completely lose sight of the theatre dimension. He seems to suggest that mime, and we will see that the related notions we have just mentioned can be added here, revives the basic theatrical notion of the actor's play and his or her interaction with an audience, as well as the social, intersubjective dimension of theatre. Mime did not make theatre extinct because it explicitly points (back) to the dramatic, play-oriented processes that are always already at work insofar as we, as human beings, are a *homo mimeticus*. Always and continuously, we materialise and (re)activate features of others, adopt traits, ideas, fantasies, and affect others in a similar way and to an equally strong degree without us even realising it. With this insight, post-war French thinkers align themselves to some extent with Plato and Aristotle who agreed that humans naturally imitate. What they have in common with the earliest Greek thinkers, on the other hand, is that in their account of mimetic play the binary division between reality and fiction is largely absent.

What seems at stake in the philosophical notion of mime in the thinking of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray, is what one could call *affirmative qualifications* of the term "*mimeticus*" viewed from its intrinsic connection with *difference*. If we are a *homo mimeticus*, they argue, then this tells us, first and foremost, that we are made-up of traces that come from elsewhere, and that these traces may pass through us without solidifying our identity once and for all. In this sense we cannot fully fall together with ourselves as autonomous beings as we need others as a condition for our sense of self. It is that same model of mimetic hybridity that is used, by Lacoue-Labarthe in particular, to account for mime as a form of theatre: we can see theatre from its practical, materialised, and evocative dynamics, which do not stand for one form of theatre, but can in fact enable and propose a plurality of theatre forms. Viewed in this light, we can also conceptually separate mime from pantomime as an aesthetic genre, and instead give more specific substance to theatrical play, namely by looking at the function of difference in concrete mimetic situations or phenomena. This study will, for this reason, avoid the (historical, aesthetic, and metaphysical) questions of what mime "is" and what mime as an artform "looks like." As we will see, the presupposition of the regained interest by French post-war thinkers in theatrical mimesis is the conviction that there "is" no theatre "preceding" or "outside" mimetic processes in the same way as there is no pre-existing self that independently of others constitutes "his" or "her" imitations. The French philosophers of difference argue that there is no point in defining theatre, as well as the self, from an "external" point of view, stabilising a social phenomenon that should instead be understood from its internal transformative processes and the ways in which these constitute worlds and singular persons.

Here, too, Lacoue-Labarthe put his finger on the sore spot when it came to the widespread disinterest in theatre. It is the dominant role of the linear, visual spectacle, where one goes purely for the "show" or — put somewhat less nicely — to be served up a bite-sized story, and the related passivity and neutrality on the part of the "recipient," that is called into question. The "minor" tradition of mime, mimicry and mimetism in the works of the French thinkers in this study aim to break through the underlying binary opposition of activity/passivity, which was inextricably bound up with traditional theatre. In addition, with their quest for affirmative — non-derivative — understandings of terms such as mime (from the Greek *mîmos*), mimeuse, phantom, shadow, spectre, … they also aim to side-line the primacy of visuality in thinking about what constitutes a theatre as well as the self.

Finally, there is, I suspect, another significant and formative aspect to the contemporary (re)turn to the concept of mimesis: Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Irigaray do not initially approach the problems of mimesis and the mime from the standard readings of the philosophical tradition (besides Plato and Aristotle, one can extend this field to the theories of mimesis by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, René Girard, and Jean Baudrillard to name but a few).[4] Their interest in mimesis and the mime are informed by distinctly non-philosophical texts and practices. For instance, it is surprising that Derrida, in his deconstruction of the concept of mimesis in his 1972 book *Dissemination*, among others, does not turn to the theories of mimesis in philosophy, but instead focuses on a literary text by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé that has a pantomime piece as its main subject. Lacoue-Labarthe too seemed to be effectively moved by alternative conceptions of mimesis and the theatre only after he himself spent a period working as a translator and dramatist at the Strasbourg Theatre. Building on his theatre and literary work, he wrote about the practical solutions and peculiar status of the actor on stage as presented by Denis Diderot in his essay on the *Paradox of the Actor* (1830). Irigaray, on the other hand, took a decidedly feminist angle, combining her psychoanalytic practice and linguistic findings, examining the differences in the usages of words between boys and girls. This early work on the sexuate nature of language has irrevocably informed her later conception of mimicry in young girls and grown-up women. These diverse backgrounds have generated articulations of mime that attach to the concept of mimesis a plurality which, on the one hand, is specifically linked to post-war French thought that has the notion of difference at its core and, on the other hand, brings to the fore a historically very old conception of mimesis as *mimesthai* that is interestingly, as we will see, *also* present in Plato's thought. But before I go into this in more detail, I will first, by way of introduction, contextualise these issues historically and conceptually and with special attention to the continuity and discontinuity between the three authors central to this study: Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray.

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[4] For thematic and historical overviews of theories of mimesis in Western history, see for example M. Potolsky, *Mimesis* (2006), G. Gebauer & Ch. Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society* (Gebauer and Wulf 1995), S. IJsseling, *Mimesis: On Appearing and Being* (1997). The contemporary *re*-turn to the concept of mimesis has been investigated from an interdisciplinary perspective by Nidesh Lawtoo in, among other works, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (2013), *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (2016), "The Critic as Mime: Wilde's Theoretical Performance" (2018), *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019).

INTRODUCTION

After Xenophon's mere sketches on the topic of *mimêsis*, it was Plato who was the first Greek thinker who, in the middle of the fourth century BCE, put the mimetic arts on the map as a philosophical problem and, with results that remain ambiguous to this day, elaborated it theoretically.[5] Plato's aesthetic theory of mimesis entails describing the essence of the artwork as imitating reality, which places the artistic product thrice removed from reality.[6] If we are to believe the anti-Platonic thinkers of the late twentieth-century, Derrida in the lead, Plato's treatment of mimesis cannot be reduced to purely aesthetic questions, however. In their view, the processes that have emerged from this conception have been decisive in shaping Platonic thought throughout the history of Western philosophy. To properly map out the anti-Platonic thought of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray, it is useful to first examine in the introduction what conceptual shifts underly Plato's theory of mimesis, since this is the background against which they take a philosophical stance, a stance that can be characterised as a short-circuiting, subversion, or overflowing of binary oppositions. In addition, it is important to mention some leading studies that reinforce this thinking from a historical perspective: interpreters of Greek antiquity working on the foundations of mimesis, including Göran Sörbom, Stephen Halliwell, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Martin Puchner, and Eric Havelock, to name a few, show that Plato's dualist account of mimesis does not have a monopoly regarding the larger cultural consciousness at the time. They account for the early Greek conception of *mimesthai*, derived from *mîmos* (mime, actor), which is performance-based and precedes, historically, the opposition between reality and fiction. This is important as a background for Derrida's, Lacoue-Labarthe's and Irigaray's investigation of the function of difference in the mimetic (re)enactments of qualities, features, and models, i.e., for their figurations of the mime.

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[5] Xenophon speaks about the nature of the *mimema* in, among other places, *Memorabilia* III. 10 and III.11 (2015) and *Symposium* IV.21 (1996). For a detailed account of the classical concept of mimesis and ancient models of *mimetata,* including those by Xenophon, see Göran Sörbom, "The Classical Concept of Mimesis," in *A Companion to Art Theory* (2002).

[6] Plato explains this theory through the metaphor of the bed in Book 10 of the *Republic* (Plato 2013b, 380–405; 595-598).

Autour de Platon

Plato was the first to systematically conceptualise a philosophical theory of mimesis predicated on the notion of the image [*eidôlon*]. Plato introduced the problematic of the image as an entity ontologically detached from reality and attached it to the, at the time, very broad understanding of human imitation or *mimêsis*. In one of his essays on ancient Greece, Jean-Pierre Vernant writes: "It is at this time that the category of figural representation emerges in its specific features and, at the same time, becomes attached to *mimêsis*—the great human fact of imitation, which gives it a solid foundation." (Vernant 1991, 152) Plato's concept of the image as a "figural representation," producing a "counterfeit" reality is rooted in the human action of imitation, Vernant writes. The broad performative sphere in Greek culture of the imitative and dramatic enactment of qualities, of impersonating features (human, natural, animal, and divine) as well as the theatrical effect of evocation and symbolisation, which originally dealt with the making present of what was invisible, is now presented by Plato as an issue of the figural, visual, and representational as it "fictitiously" replaces real things with those that are "illusory." (1991, 152)

Vernant locates this shift in perception on the verge of *mythos* and *logos*. Human impersonation of the divine power of the gods ("archaic anthropomorphic idols," he calls them), are not an issue of *symbolisation* anymore but instead an issue of *representation* in terms of providing the gods' character *in an image*. This was a decisive moment in the ancient world: not only did Plato's concept of the image shift mimesis' function from the symbolisation, evocation, and illumination of divine power to visual representation, described by Vernant in terms of a "portrait," it also meant detaching mimesis from its link with the ritual sphere. Originally, mimetic enactment of the gods would

> reveal to us through the medium of the human body divine values that brilliantly illumine the idol, that transfigure it by directing on it, like a beam of light from on high, those shining blessings that derive from the gods-beauty, youth, health, life, power, grace. (Vernant 1991, 288)

In Plato, mimesis as image adds to the notion of mere mediation the suggestive idea of the appearance of the gods in a recognisable form or figure:

> Instead of merely introducing into the visible world the presence of an invisible god, the idol should also, by expert imitation of the external forms of the body, suggest to the eyes of the beholders a representation of the god's appearance. This is a decisive development that finds full expression in the Platonic theory of *mimêsis*. Defining all images produced by all forms of art, not only in the plastic arts but in music and literature, as imitations of the appearance.

Following this shift, the image functions as the matrix-concept of such ontological distinctions as being/appearance, existent/illusory, original/imitative artifice. As Vernant suggests, these distinctions are not prior to Plato's determination of the image but are *provoked* by it as it is attached to the human act of imitation. Here, as well, Plato inserts a new specification: an act that could initially be performed by practically anyone now becomes an issue of *specialised* performance:

> The symbol that actualizes, that makes present in this world below a power from the world beyond (a fundamentally invisible being) is now transformed into an image that is the product of an expert imitation, which, as a result of skillful technique and illusionist procedures, enters into the general category of the "fictitious"—that which we call art. (1991, 152)

Plato's convergence of image, expert imitation, fiction, and art will be at the centre of Plato's most-quoted passages on mimesis in *Republic* book 10 and is generally viewed as illustrative of Plato's theory of mimesis. Scholars such as Vernant, Halliwell and Havelock, however, resist such a systematic account for the very reason that the shift in the general understanding of mimesis in Greek culture that I have briefly sketched out above can be traced in Plato's dialogues as well. In other words, they argue that it is not as simple as saying that Plato's theory of mimesis "generally" entails artistic representation rooted in the concept of the image. His views on mimesis are not one-dimensional and so straightforwardly and systematically developed as most books on aesthetics make it to be. Instead, these scholars focus on the continuities and discontinuities of the conceptual shift — in part presented by Plato's dialogues — as regards the conception of mimesis and pay attention to the instances in which this shift is *at play*. This is important considering our understanding of the French philosophers of difference who, in their (re)activation of Plato's thought, *echo* this gesture: they are not interested in simply refuting Plato's ontological dualisms provoked by artistic representation but instead centralise internal, conceptual differentiations of mimesis. Following the classical scholars mentioned, they will aim to focus on fragments in Plato's dialogues in which dramatic mimeticism in Greek culture is understood as 1) a conception historically prior to the image and 2) contrasted and in dialogue with Plato's claims about the image, i.e., figurative representation. But before we address this issue and enter the second half of the twentieth century, I want to take one step back to clarify the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*.

Mythos & Logos

The mimesis linked to the world of myth (Ancient Greek thought as inhabited by the stories of gods, goddesses, and heroes), would best be described as *divine possession*. In one of Plato's earliest and shortest dialogues, the *Ion* (2014), this is explored through the performance of the rhapsodist. In this dialogue, we see the powers of the Muse at work who, by way of divine inspiration possesses, first, the poet, then the rhapsode performing, and finally the audience members.[7] Mimesis as divine possession revolves around a magnetic "chain," generated by the powers of the Muse, which sustains an affective bond between the gods, the poet, the performer, and the spectator (Plato 2014, 533d-e). The mimetic quality of Ion's performance is that of *mediation* or *transmission*: his rhapsodic technique is not dependent on the knowledge and imitation of a pre-established reality or model but is instead based on merely *passing on* what had been imprinted on him by the Muse. Although based on a distinguished mimetic craft, it side-lines the question of knowledge which is why Socrates ultimately dismisses Ion's type of performance.

One way of looking at Ion's and Socrates' contrasting views on mimesis here is the notion that there at two clashing models or organising principles of reality at play: the *Ion* is placed right at the verge of a world configured around *myth* vis-à-vis a world configured around *logos*. Because Socrates looks at Ion's rhapsody from the viewpoint of the image, which complies to the realm of *fiction*, he interrogates him about the intention and knowledge behind his fictitious appearances. Ion replies that there are no intentions "behind" his performance; he merely channels what inspires him about Homer's verses, which was a dominant understanding and use of mimesis in a world that revolved around myth, story, and ritual. The division between reality and fiction, which underlies Plato's determination of the image, is alien to Ion.

Ion exemplifies the contrast between what Plato later calls "good" and "bad" mimesis. The first would be the mimesis used by the philosopher, the second by the mimetic actor.

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[7] For more on Plato's *Ion*, see C. Capuccino, "Plato's Ion And The Ethics Of Praise" and F.J. Gonzalez, "The Hermeneutics Of Madness: Poet And Philosopher In Plato's Ion And Phaedrus," in *Plato and the Poets* (Destrée and Herrmann 2011, 63–92; 93–110). For a (anti-Platonic) contemporary reading of the *Ion*, specifically from the perspective of theatrical mimesis as developed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, see N. Hadikoesoemo, "Altering Bodies: Thinking of intervention through impersonation" (2020). On the relation between the poets, mimesis, and possession, see "Poetry As Flawed Reproduction: Possession And Mimesis" in *Plato and the Poets* (Destrée and Herrmann 2011, 41–61).

Where the poet uses mimesis without any obligation towards inquiring into the true Being of things, the philosopher uses mimesis for good ends as it is always reflective of desiring true knowledge. It has been pointed out by many however that this distinction is historically not so clear-cut, moreover, the difference would often be difficult to detect form the outside (which is particularly worrisome to Plato). Nevertheless, it will become the foundation of the distinction between myth, linked to the idea of mediation between divine power and the human world, as *fiction*, and logos as the movement towards *rational philosophy*.

The reason why I explained the contrast between mythos and logos through the example of the mimetic performer of Ion is because the distinction between the two worldviews can precisely be understood against the backdrop of mimetic performance as either complying to the model of *mediation* or a model of *representation* as they express two radically different conceptual paradigms. Vernant explains this distinction as a difference between mimesis as *exhibition* (myth) or *demonstration* (logos), which is a distinction that we see at work in Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Plato's views on the theatre as well:

> What Plato wants […] is people who, in the name of the knowledge they have, come and say in person, directly in front of other people, what they think and what it is necessary to do. Theatre mounts a show [*montre*], it exhibits, but it does not demonstrate [*démontre*]. Worst of all, no "personal" responsibility is taken there. Anything can be offered with impunity. In contrast, Plato's ideal is that of a properly assumed discourse. (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003a, 59)

We immediately see why, in the dialogue, Ion is looked at suspiciously by Socrates: he avoids taking responsibility for what he is portraying because, as he states himself, as a performer he only exists by virtue of the Muse. Ion (more or less) says, "the root of my rhapsody is the Muse, who makes me inspired by Homer and allows me to craftfully make visible the truths of the gods that are at work in his poetry." There is no intention to deceive, produce falsities or mislead people because Ion's performance is not based on a model of truth and falsity, but on the dominant, early Greek notion of exhibiting the gods' truths via poetry. Ion exhibits or exposes what passes through him. He is not the "origin," "maker" or "representative" of the truths he reveals, which is why "demonstration" would be a misplaced term. We see in Ion the overall lack of accounting for what Lacoue-Labarthe explained above as Plato's general aim, which is providing a "proper" discourse that he would then, in a second move, demonstrate in front of an audience.

In short, before Plato’s paradigm of the image, theatrical mimesis was understood as an exceptionally hybrid notion, mediating between contrasting, singular spheres.[8] Ion’s mediation is based on the exhibition of *two* realities at once: “nature and “supernature”. They are not presented as mutually exclusive, hierarchically structured or mirroring each other, but instead they are presented according to their distinct nature (“one face can be seen,” another “turned toward the invisible”) but also in terms of their interplay, in other words, they can intervene in each other’s realm through Ion’s vicarious play.

Vicariousness, Diegesis, Mimesis

The concept of vicariousness is problematised by Plato through an examination of the style of poetry in Book 3 of the *Republic*, where he distinguishes between diegetic speech and mimetic speech. Diegetic speech is based on the narration of a story from a story-teller’s perspective: it is “the poet himself who is speaking and he makes no attempt to distract our minds into thinking that anyone else is talking except himself.” (Plato 2013a, 250–51; 3.393-a-b). Mimetic speech, on the other hand, “[is] modeling himself on someone else, either [in] his voice or his appearance” (Plato 2013a, 250–51; 3.393c).[9] In the first case, Socrates explains the style of poetical speech as speaking in one’s own name, that is, presenting oneself as an identifiable person who takes responsibility for the story (for example, by making comments in between the lines about the behaviour of the gods or Achilles). This is in line with the idea of the *demonstration* of truths: you tell the story in such a way that it is immediately clear to the audience what your personal stance is (based on the truth-value of what is being said) so that there is no ambiguity raised in the perception of the spectators regarding issues of virtue and justice. By contrast, the mimetic style of poetical speech is presented by Socrates as moulding oneself according to the characters in the story, so that one *becomes* those characters. Vicariously, one presents oneself on behalf of those characters without making any distinction in speech or appearance with one’s own speech and character. This is in line with the idea of the *exhibition* of truths: one presents the story from the point of view of the figures in the story (those could refer to animals, natural phenomena, people, gods) with the aim to activate truths evoked by the poetical language and through mimetic inspiration.

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[8] “The symbol [expressed through human mediation] presupposes two levels, nature and supernature; contrasting levels, but by a play of correspondences, communication is sometimes established between them, the supernatural irrupting into nature to “appear” there in the form of those double realities of which one face can be seen, but the other remains turned toward the invisible.” (Vernant 1991, 288)

[9] For a detailed account of diegetic and mimetic speech in Plato’s *Republic*, see S. Halliwell, “Diegesis – Mimesis,” in *Handbook of Narratology* (2014).

Crucially, in Socrates' description of the use of mimesis in poetry here we see that he already speaks from the viewpoint of the image. The poet or performer becomes another *in appearance*. One must be *visibly* and *identifiably* another figure which entails a radical modification of one's own nature. Where Ion's rhapsody worked according to a model of vicariousness that short-circuits any presupposed duality between the "self" of the actor and the "self" of the character, including the notion of pictorial representation, Plato has now subtly inscribed in mimesis a dual notion of imitation: an original identity and a fictional character that are to be understood as ontologically distinct. This is the conceptual shift where mimesis would enter the realm of aesthetics: it is the application of outward features onto the "real" self that indicate a concealment of reality and furthermore promote cultural luxury:

> …filling it [the city] with numerous things which go beyond strict necessity, . . . for example the practitioners of mimesis: the many who use shapes and colors, the many who use musical forms, the poets and their assistants (rhapsodes, actors, dancers, theatrical impresarios), and the makers of multifarious products, including women's cosmetics. (Plato 2013a, 2.373b)

What is strictly necessary in the city is explained by Socrates repeatedly throughout the dialogues as that which has *property*. This is also the reason behind the poet speaking in his own name: as long as his views are transparent throughout his utterance of poetical language, he retains his "proper," that is, stable identity and can — in accordance with its conceptual closeness to propriety — demonstrate truths that are reliable and hence suitable for educational purposes.

But as suggested, the image and pictorial representation are not notions prior to the cultural understanding of mimesis but are rather provoked by it. As Havelock has argued in his *Preface to Plato* (1982), the "improper" dimension that lies at the heart of mimetic enactments — having multiple origins or no origin altogether — cannot be so easily controlled: the mythical, dramatic and ritualistic dimension of music, poetry and stories cannot by some magical act be separated from its cultural roots. Most clearly, we see this impossibility in the fact that (Plato's notion of) impropriety is itself deeply engrained in many of Plato's own dialogues. For instance, the figure of Socrates cannot speak in his own name for the simple reason that he is absent and therefore needs Plato's staging for his truths to be voiced. Plato explicitly uses the mimetic device of vicariously revealing the true task of philosophy via another character without ever making explicit the ontological separation that would verify and solidify the truth-value of his speech. This ambiguity is also apparent in the role of narrational shifts between dialogue, allegory, myth, and metaphor in Plato's work. To be sure, this aspect is not new, it has been pointed out by many, but it is nonetheless important to mention for its strong link with irony, which is a recurring and important theme in contemporary French accounts of Platonic mimesis.[10] Lacoue-Labarthe articulated this irony as follows: "All these attempts to reduce the improper, these attempts at cleaning, at 'purification', are part of a great machinery of identification which is entirely founded upon imitation itself." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003a, 58)

The Critique of the Metaphysics of Presence

What plays at the background of the opposition between exhibition/myth /vicariousness and demonstration/logos/identity is what Derrida described (and deconstructed) as the "metaphysics of presence," a philosophical tradition that begins with Plato. Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Derrida explains how the philosophical tradition in the West has been predominantly occupied with the question of being, of being as a whole, and the determination of such quest as a *being-present*. According to this metaphysical tradition, "being" signifies the whole of being, its totality, and presupposes its presence before us: we encounter the being of things as a presence that is graspable by us in its wholeness and immediacy. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that this quest corresponds with the "disclosure of truth as a presentation of the thing itself." (Derrida 1997, xxiii) The notion of truth as *correctness* solidifies the correspondence of thought with reality, i.e., with how reality *is*. The task to overthrow Platonism, in Derrida's echoing of Heidegger, would be to deconstruct the notion of the presence of being in thought. This entails showing that the "now" of a thought cannot be self-contained because the moment that we have established "now" will have in the meantime already been absorbed by a series of new now's, *ad infinitum*, hence the eternal deferral of presence. The coincidence of being and presence must hence in Derrida's view be deconstructed as a false unity.

But there is yet another aspect of the deconstruction of presence as presented by Derrida that is important for our thesis and that is its link with *orality*. This is illustrated most famously by Derrida's example of the (in French) phonetic sameness of the words *différence* and *différance* (Derrida 1978b; 1968). Although the French word *différer* signifies both "delay" or "postpone," and "to be different" or "to differ," with Derrida's invention of the non-existent word *différance*, he wanted to show that "in speech itself, something was already at work that exceeded the apparent immediacy, proximity to self, and presence of the voice. Even a language without notation, in other words, was irreducible to an oral or phonetic reality." (L. Hill 2007, 16) The metaphysics of presence hence also enters the realm of *self-presence* and indeed most concretely the presence and transparency of the (human) subject to itself insofar as, within this tradition, the subject is first and foremost a thinking and speaking being. According to Derrida, since Plato, the human subject will forever be haunted by being the locus (point or place) of logocentrism (the privileging of reason based on the subject's spontaneous relation to truth and reality).[11] Additionally, this idea is in close proximity to *phonocentrism*, which is what Derrida sees at work in Plato's dialogues as well: the prevalence of oral speech over the written word. However, the binary between the written word and oral speech must be deconstructed as itself the product of logocentrism. Derrida shows how the two do not equally comply to the ideal of selfsameness and self-presence because they designate two irreducible structures of thinking (or texts, more specifically) that constantly intervene in and transform each other. Conceptually separating and then setting up — in a hierarchical fashion — a relation between the two would again presuppose a false account of ontological sameness. More simply put, it is based on the idea that we can only account for writing insofar as it is copying oral language understood as an autonomous, self-sufficient, and immediate reality. However, with his notion of *différance,* Derrida shows that thinking and speaking out loud are equally subject to, i.e., apt to be affected by forms of writing.

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[10] A paradigmatic work regarding the dramatic roots of Plato's dialogues is M. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* (2010).

In the secondary literature, Derrida's previously mentioned "closure of representation" and the deconstruction of mimesis has been viewed mostly through this lens, which is the degradation of poetry vis-à-vis the movement towards a universalising logos. However, here we must pause for a moment and recall our earlier historical account of theatrical mimesis. Because, what exactly is underlying this "quarrel" between poetry and logos (as Socrates once put it)?[12] According to commentators such as Havelock who foreground the importance of orality in antiquity, it is not so much the ontologically degraded status of the written word (which would be subject to the metaphysical critique of mimesis), but instead the fact that the theatrical or dramatic styles of performing poetry — as we saw at work in Ion for instance — is embedded in an oral tradition. This is the background for our understanding of Plato's shifting views on mimesis. Burnyeat:

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[11] This term was coined in the early 1900's by the German philosopher Ludwig Klages. See also J. Josephson, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (2017).

[12] This phrase can be found in Book 10 of the *Republic.* There are different translations available of this phrase. The Loeb edition says: "there's been a long-standing dispute between philosophy and poetry." (Plato 2013b, 436–37; 10.607b). For a contemporary account of this "quarrel," from the perspective of performance philosophy, see J. Corby, "The Contemporary Quarrel Between Performance and Literature? Reflections on Performance (and) Philosophy" for *Performance Philosophy* (2015).

> What he [Plato] is chiefly talking about is the words and music by which the culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Forget about reading T.S. Eliot to yourself in bed. Our subject is the words and music you hear at social gatherings, large and small. Think pubs and cafés, karaoke, football matches, the last night of the Proms. Think Morning Service at the village church, carols from King's College Cambridge, Elton John singing to the nation from Westminster Abbey. (2012, 54)

Plato's objections against mimesis must be understood against the background of the *oral transmission of knowledge* by any educational figure in society (which was at the time a very broad and not so clearly defined realm). This is where the trouble starts, so to speak, because, in Plato's view, the philosophical quest for truth must precisely also be orally transmitted. This inevitably causes a rivalry in the realm of education as all mimetic practices at the time (from physical exercises to music to dance to storytelling) were part of the educational system and were based on orality.

Derrida's observation of the non-immediacy of oral speech now becomes more intelligible. In Plato's view, mimetic artists and performers such as Ion indirectly make a claim to truth because they perform and disseminate their poetry orally. Because Ion uses Homer's poetry as a direct form of speech, he is as an educator *obliged* to demonstrate moral virtues and unambiguous insights regarding the behaviour of the gods, because what is orally transmitted is by definition true. However, the mimetic actor defies even the bare minimum of Plato's ideal of oral transmission: he is not even capable of accounting for *himself* let alone his speech, which is in contradiction with the idea of the self-presence of the speaking subject. On top of that, as we saw in Ion's explanation of his rhapsody, the mimetic actor is the exemplification of oral language differing from itself. The fact that, in speech, Ion can change character through the shift of narrational styles, without any proper identity that grounds and contains those transformations, shows something fundamental about the nature of oral speech in general: that there is always something in the style of transmission that produces a differentiation of texts. Oral language can never be fully self-enclosed, self-identical, self-transparent and one-dimensional in its transmission of ideas and affects because it is configured through mimetic devices that cannot be contained within a binary structure (*mythos* vs. *logos* for example). Take notions such as rhythm, melody, musicality, charm, playfulness, gesture, etc.: their evocative power does not miraculously disappear with the emergence of the ideal of logos and cannot be exhaustively explained by its produced dualisms either. Thinkers such as Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray will — against this background — speak about these notions (rhythm, musicality, etc.) as "haunting" modernity.[13] In their reappropriation of Plato's mimetic figurations such as "spectre," "ghost," "shadow," "double," "phantom," "phantasm" they aim to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence, and the binary structure of mimesis (original/copy, presence/absence,…) that is derived from it. No matter how strong the quest for the transparency of knowledge and truth, these mimetic notions will irrevocably — or "unconsciously" (with Freud) — come out and pervert the Platonic, binary systems of thought. In Derrida's vocabulary, there is always that *différance*, that irreducible and empty "outside" of language that one must presuppose for the system as a whole to be upheld, and this includes the metaphysical system organised around the principle of selfsameness or identity as well.

French contemporary philosophers will also tend to show how the regulation and policing of language through the "matrix" of logocentrism results in the neutralisation, even erasure of difference, which has political, institutional, and ethical implications as it provides a rational justification of the exclusion of certain linguistic expressions and significations of identity. This is addressed perhaps most explicitly in the philosophy of Irigaray, who shows, in line with Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan's "phallogocentrism" (the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning), that there is an irreducible "outside" to the male-centred use and production of language in the West, and that outside is *feminine*. It is a feminine non-signifier, itself uncategorisable and unperceivable, which must sustain the production of meaning that has the male figure (a "masculine morphology" as Irigaray would call it) as its "neutralised" universal. Whether it serves accounts of justice, reason or even education, Western languages have carefully, craftfully and systematically covered over that feminine "outside" at the heart of their philosophies (which again is not the same as saying that the feminine is absent, on the contrary, it is very present yet not acknowledged as partaking in the philosophical inquiry because placed outside of reason). In Irigaray, Plato's metaphor of the *mirror* is used to show how the (masculine) reproductive system of mimesis neutralises the possibility of a feminine language: if language is structured around the model of the masculine, it is precisely the logic of the mirror that will allow that language to reflect itself into infinity and without deviation. The reproductive function of mimesis is inherently part of how a masculine logos keeps duplicating itself in culture, from one generation to the next, which, seen from its own logic, will never change on its own (hence the notion of repetition without difference). We will come back to Irigaray's philosophical answer to this, but not before I have said a few words about how the deconstruction of mimesis to a certain extend relies on the ancient account of *mimesthai*, which may also open a conceptual horizon beyond deconstruction.

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[13] Worth mentioning here is a recent issue of *Modern Language Notes (MLN)*, entitled "Poetics and Politics: with Lacoue-Labarthe," (2017b), edited by N. Lawtoo, which deals with precisely this problem through Lacoue-Labarthe's lens of the relationship between "poetics" and "politics." The idea of mimesis casting a "shadow" over contemporary times is also central to the so-called (re)turn of the concept of mimesis as conceptualised by Nidesh Lawtoo.

From Mimesis to Mimetism via Mimesthai

In his influential text on imitation in the fifth century, Gerald F. Else distinguishes three understandings of the Greek verb *mimesthai.* The first is "miming":

> What we have found in the fifth century is not a theory but a bundle of interrelated, concrete word-usages. True to its parentage, *mimeisthai* seems to denote originally a "miming" or mimicking of a person or animal by means of voice and/or gesture. Often, but not invariably, the medium is music and dancing; in any case the essential idea is the rendering of characteristic look, action, or sound through human means. (Else 1958, 87)

Coming "from the home of mime, Siciliy," this mode predominantly consisted of using voice and/or body to evoke human or animal features (1958, 87). As Else suggests, voice and body were usually accompanied by music, which explains the strong affinity between *mimesthai* and *mousikē*, the umbrella-term for the musicopoetic arts (poetry, music, and dance) (Halliwell 2009, 19; Villegas Velez 2020, 185).[14] Emerging from this came the second mode, which comes closest to simple imitation ("to 'imitate' another person in general, to do as or what he does"), followed by the third mode, signifying imitation in materials ("at the same time or not much later, and particularly in the secondary derivative *mimêma*, the concept of mimicry was transferred to material 'images': pictures, statues, and the like"). (Else 1958, 87) Following this historical trail, the word *mimêsis* was coined after and could denote either of these three notions. More importantly, we learn from Else's study that these three different accounts were culturally acknowledged at the time that Plato was alive, which rejects the dominance of the notion of imitation, that is "simple" imitation, in Plato's understanding of mimesis as well as theatrical performance more generally speaking (Else 1958, 87).

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[14] These two characteristics of mime, the first being the evocation of animal features, the second being the closeness to music and sound, can be found in two passages in Pindar. In the first, the dancer is to invoke the movements of animals through the "light dancing of feet":

Imitate the Pelasgian horse or dog
from Amyclae as you shake with your foot
in the contest and drive forward the curved song,
even as it flies over the flowery
Dotian plain, seeking to find death
for the horned deer;
and as she turns her head on her neck
(the dog pursues?) her along every path." (Pindar 1997a, 350–51; 107a)

In the second, we see the theatrical reenactment through the musical instrument of the aulos:

But when she had rescued her beloved hero from
those toils, the maiden composed a melody with every
sound for pipes,
so that she might imitate with instruments the echoing wail
that was forced from the gnashing jaws of Euryale." (Pindar 1997b, 392–93; 12.21)

For a detailed account of theatrical mimesis in Pindar and Aeschylus, see A. Uhlig, *Theatrical Reenactment in Pindar and Aeschylus* (2019).

The heterogeneous and rich landscape of mime, implicated in the notion of *mimesthai* can also be derived from its etymological root: *mîmos* (mime). Else: "the first and most obvious thing about *mimeisthai*, whatever its meaning, is that it is a denominative verb based on *mîmos*." (Else 1958, 74) Focusing on the nature of *mîmos* rather than the style or genre of mime performance is reminiscent of our earlier discussion on mime, which is the importance of not conflicting mime with a certain kind of visual representation. Else's point seems to be that the *mîmos* can come in all colours and shapes and he or she does not represent any one genre of performance but rather designates the basic human ability to transform, to modify one's body and voice according to specific features and with a kind of playfulness. This description is also central in Sörbom's account of the mime, who warns us to not equate mime too quickly with realism (i.e., the mimicking of a person based on visual similarity):

> The mime author and the mime actor may pick out some properties of particular phenomena they have met with and display them in the mime. But, and this is the heart of the matter, they did not do so in order to make portraits of the particular phenomena used as models but in order to represent something more general, the notion of a 'coward in battle' or of a 'man stealing cows', for instance. (Sörbom 1966, 26)

Sörbom's use of the word "display" is particularly revealing as it coincides with our earlier conception of mimesis as exhibition (in contrast to demonstration). The mime's display of features aims to invoke phenomena, which are already, qualitatively, much more complex than simply "looking like this or that," because it is an assemblage of features that are in themselves already evocative. In other words, the mime's craft entails taking from life what already in itself has the potential to be funny, tragic, or simply entertaining, because they are phenomena that anyone could recognise. The mime displays what is entertaining in life which is not the same as attributing to the mime the label of entertainer, because in the latter case it would the mime *making* things entertaining which is not essentially what the mime is about.[15] The mime is merely, like in the case of the rhapsode Ion, a transmitter or "port-parole" (with Lacoue-Labarthe).

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[15] Görbom: "the mime presented human life 'as it is', 'unvarnished', neither with tragic sublimity added to it nor looked upon in a comic mirror." (1966, 23–24)

It is the mime's early Greek link with the notions of exhibition, transmission, and display that we will use as the main conceptual background for the reconfiguration of mimesis in terms of mime in the philosophies of Derrida, Lacoue-Labathe and Irigaray. There are roughly three aspects of the ancient understanding of *mimesthai* as conceptualised by Vernant, Halliwell, Else, and Görbom, that will be important entering the late twentieth century France, and in particular Derrida's deconstruction of mimesis, which fuelled a renewed interest in the concept. First, it is the plural understanding of *mimesthai* at the root of mime which endows the concept of mimesis with a mobility and hybridity. This character trait makes of mimesis a distinctly non-unitary concept because, in the cultural consciousness, mime was understood as capturing the fleeting moments of life without embellishment, modification and demonstration. In other words, mime was the exposition of phenomena through a moving and or speaking/singing body in which life itself appeared as hybrid and in motion.

Second, the mime as human figure can help us understand the difference between acting according to a model of *demonstration*, which is distinctly Platonic (obeying a metaphysical binary opposition between reality and fiction), and acting according to a model of *exhibition, exposition,* or *display.* As we will see, the main task of our contemporary thinkers is to deconstruct these two modes of mime, to investigate how they are irreducibly different and yet how they are irrevocably tied together. But most crucially they will argue for the importance of not reducing the model of exhibition to that of demonstration because that would mean subsuming mime under the Platonic model of reality and fiction, which is conceptually, as well as historically, incorrect.

Third, the notion of mime as the display of life introduces a fascinating account of the subject. It suggests a mode of being in which a singular person is, on one hand, subject to mimetic processes (mimetism), and, on the other, not reducible to it. It is exposing mimetism as fact of life, in a sense *independent* of the person. Miming is hence not based on internalising, embodying, or applying fictional characters to the self, or mimicking a preconceived ideal. If we take the mime as a model for the constitution of the self, what does this tell us exactly? Lacoue-Labarthe says somewhere that we are all mimes in the sense that we are all "port-paroles" in life, with which he meant that we are placeholders of what he calls a "circulation of language," we — simply through living — adopt language and pass it on to others. In a similar fashion, everything we can say about a person is what we could say about someone else in terms of personal traits. Nevertheless, the fact that mime is — however simple its display of phenomena may sound — a *craft*. That is to say, it actually takes real effort to make the exposition of phenomena not fall into realism, i.e., to *not* represent them according to a model. This is not as easy as it sounds. By analogy, it is not so simple to account for the self as a mere vessel for languages and features that precede you and that do not provide any stability of being. This is a central problem in contemporary accounts of the mimetic self. In brief, the ancient *mîmos* invites us to think about the mimetic self as a constant effort to reject falling together with the model of representation.

Mimetism and Deconstruction in France: The Historical Context

In 1974, in the wake of May ’68, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Sylviane Agacinsky, Sarah Kofman and Jacques Derrida initiated the book collection *Philosophy Indeed* [*La philosophie en effet*] for Editions Galilée. After having invited Derrida to speak at a Strasbourg conference in 1970–71, it quickly became clear that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, who were already close collaborators, and Kofman, among others, shared what they called a “political experience” (Agacinski et al. 1975, 33). The culmination-point of what later became, more generally, the “Strasbourg experience” is the first edition of the book collection, entitled *Mimesis: des articulation* (1975), which featured all five thinkers. In “À propos de la ‘mimesis,” a collective interview in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* of 1976, Kofman explains that the publication was prompted by a shared interest in the concept of mimesis and in particular one of Derrida’s seminars on this topic, later published as “The Double Session” (1981), an essay that revolves around Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetical text *Mimique* (Agacinski et al. 1976, 19/21). Importantly, *La Quinzaine* introduces the discussion by making a remark about the phonetic aspect of the title “Mimesis *dés*articulations” rather than “Mimesis: les articulations,” which was emblematic for *Mimesis’* focus on the plurality of articulations implicated in the concept of mimesis. Take Derrida’s “mimeuse,” “mimosa,” and “economimesis,” or Lacoue-Labarthe’s “typography,” and “mime de rien,” Pautrat’s Brechtian “scène” and Nancy’s “effet mimétique,” to name a few. These thinkers want to make explicit that their conceptions are not exhaustive and that the general incompleteness of *Mimesis* had a direct impact on their non-unified accounts. (McKeane 2015, 53–54)

The idea of pluralism is central to the overall argument in *Mimesis* and applies to the heterogeneity implicated in mimesis as well as philosophy. The writers argue that there is something in the workings of mimesis, they prefer thinking about mimesis in terms of a process, mechanism, dynamic or procedure, which short-circuits the original/copy dichotomy so characteristic of a traditional philosophical model of mimesis in terms of *imitation* [*imitatio*]. Kofman explains:

> We did not want the usual tradition 'imitation' which supposes precisely an original and originating model of which *Mimesis* would be the simple copy, the image, the repetition, the reproduction. *Mimesis* thwarts all these oppositions, that of the primary and the derivative, of the model and the copy, etc. (Agacinski et al. 1976, 20; my translation).

By foregrounding the plurality integral to notions of mimesis, *Mimesis* shows that every philosophical inquiry into the subject necessarily produces numerous possible articulations, precisely because of mimesis' inherent conceptual pluralism. For these writers, philosophical articulations of mimesis are themselves "procedures" of mimesis or forms of *mimétisme* as Lacoue-Labarthe prefers to call it. They argue that philosophising and a theoretical practice more generally are inevitably affected by the nature of the concept at hand. Writing about mimesis cannot escape its embeddedness in the philosophical tradition. One can only articulate the function — or "regimes" to stay more closely to their vocabulary — of mimesis by carefully deconstructing its historical meaning and role within the tradition of Western thought. Indeed, true to their deconstructive readings, *Mimesis*' aim is to find difference in their repetition of historical accounts of mimesis, rather than sameness affirmed through a unifying term. In *Mimesis*, the readings range from Plato's *Sophist* to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to Rousseau's *Confessions* to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra,* to name a few. Based on these readings, the writers show how mimesis works as a model of *participation* in and *production* of difference, rather than as a model for the *reproduction* of one single difference, most notably, that between original and copy. As we will see over the course of these chapters and in varying ways, this deconstruction of mimesis hollows out the narrow definition of simple imitation, because it strips away the model's and copy's supposed origin of sameness and self-transparency.

The second central point in the *Quinzaine* discussion as well as in *Mimesis*, is the writers' problematisation of the relation between the image and truth. As stated, since Plato Western aesthetics has always linked the concept of mimesis to the written word (literature) or the image (the visual arts). Within this framework, mimesis is explained as to provide a visual, be it in word or image, reproduction of reality. The status of the image depends on their lineage with and the degree in which it succeeds in capturing reality. The truth of the image is constituted by the reality it represents. Within literary study, Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* ((1946) is a paradigmatic work in that regard. His study of realism in Western literature argues that the story's truthfulness is intrinsically related to the historical period referred to by the writer. For example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* provides an actual historical account of 17th century Spain. Our perception of Don Quixote's tragicomic adventures as true or truthful is determined by the way in which Cervantes succeeds in "staying true" to what would have happened to a person with that kind of personality within that political system and social climate.[16] What is at stake for the French post-war thinkers we are focusing on, is the ontological presupposition which informs the ideal of realism, namely, that there is nature or reality, on the one hand, and a reproduction of it in the form of a book or painting, on the other. They are 'naturally' distinct: reality and artistic representation differ *in nature*. The artist observes and reproduces its subject "as it is," that is, as it is "given" in nature, "objectively," "in all its nakedness," so to speak. In this sense, art cannot precede nature or reality for it exists only in its secondary reflection of it. While nature is true in and of itself. According to a realist understanding of mimesis, art is not only derivate of but also comes, chronologically speaking, "after'" nature.

Sylviane Agacinski, a fellow contributor of the *Quinzaine* issue and the *Mimesis* book, radicalises mimesis' paradigm of realism by deconstructing the categories of and the relation between image and truth:

> One more word on the 'theme' of mimesis: it is, as well, that of truth. For example when Wittgenstein wonders on what condition a speech can be true, his immediate answer (at least in the *Tractatus*) is that this speech must be an image of reality. The status of the image and that of the truth present an inevitable complicity; it is at work everywhere (painting, theatre, writing), everywhere where the truth is in question, and vice versa. (Agacinski et al. 1976, 21; my translation).

Via Wittgenstein, Agacinski inverses the idea of the image as replica of reality. Rather than simply arguing that mimesis depends on reality for its truth value, she suggests that truth depends on the image as well. Mimesis and truth are characterised by their mutual complicity to one another. On the one hand, the image is complicit in the reality it depicts; on the other, truth is complicit in the image of reality. Mimesis designates truth as much as truth designates mimesis insofar as they function as each other's necessary condition. One cannot accept the image as a truthful copy of reality without agreeing to the idea that truth depends on the image we create. By consequence, mimesis destabilises our sense of the real as a homogenised and stable unity because it opens the possibility that reality is a mere effect of what is perceived as true *in the image*. As is well-known, this lies at the core of Plato's objections against artists in Book 10 of the *Republic* (2013b): they sabotage the quest for true knowledge by intentionally blurring the line between fiction and reality.

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[16] Of course, taking into consideration the role of style complicates the issue. The reason why we mention Auerbach's study here is because of its formative role in the understanding of mimesis in literary theory as a key concept to grasp the relationship between reality and art. As Gebauer and Wulf rightfully remark, however, in their critical reading of Auerbach, mimesis as "realism" is a poor definition as it assumes an a-historical, unitary notion of reality: "artistic mimesis signals a turn toward social reality. But the latter is in no sense given once and for all; it takes on different forms through various historical epochs. It is therefore not enough simply to define the concept; we must follow its historical movement. The changes in 'mimesis' express mutations in social reality." (Gebauer and Wulf 1995, 9)

Against this tradition, deconstruction problematises the relation between fiction and reality based on the *substitutive* power of mimesis. Contrary to the idea of imitation as an act of duplication in which the copy is derivative of an original, substitution accounts for art as a *replacement* as well as *supplementation* of nature: art substitutes for nature but only insofar as it adds a necessary supplement.[17] Mimesis as both substitution and complementation defies the binary logic of art and nature: it shows the processes according to which they are entangled yet without being reducible to one another. What plays in the background of deconstruction and the idea of supplementation is the reversal of Platonism. The idea of mimesis as substitution helps them to achieve this as it does not simply entail favouring the copy over the original. Instead, they conceptualise mimesis as a dynamic in which repetition generates a dialogue where model and copy are *at play,* that is, their relation is one of play. As we will see in the varying figurations of mime proposed by the three main authors discussed in the forthcoming chapters, the gesture to overcome Platonism *will have to pass through Plato*. They show that the early Greek notion of mimesis as *mimesthai* (rather than *imitatio*), which gives play a more distinctly theatrical connotation, is not absent from Plato's dialogues, but is instead paradoxically (re)activated and brough to light by Plato himself. The central idea being that the conceptual subtleties arising from the dramatic roots of mimesis in addition to the logic of supplementation will enable these French authors to surpass Platonism by passing through Plato.

As is well-established, already within the context of deconstruction, a mimetic act, whether it involves an image, a text, a thought, or a gesture, produces model and copy or nature and art simultaneously and as a game which requires playing. If the relation between model and copy does not gravitate around a pre-established model of selfsameness but instead circles around a model of play than this presupposes that the model does not precede and outweigh the copy: the model functions just as well as a copy of another model, which in turn copies yet another model, *ad infinitum*. As deconstruction repeatedly emphasises, this concerns the question of thought and philosophy as well. Kofman clarifies this idea when she describes her identity as a philosopher in terms of being mimetically intertwined with the tradition. Referring to Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, she writes:

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[17] Derrida develops his so-called "logic of supplementarity," based on the double meaning of the French word "le supplément," which is a derivation of two verbs: to add to (supplémenter) and to substitute (suppléer). This is, in turn, analysed against the background of his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on the term "supplement" in *Of Grammatology* (1967; 1997).

> Two rival 'geniuses' I have always needed to hold together so that neither of them could ultimately win out over the other, or over 'me'. Endlessly playing the one and the other, and playing the one off against the other, in 'me', I prevent both from gaining mastery. (Kofman 1993, 371–72)

Kofman's notion of "holding togetger" only to then transfigure Freud's, Nietzsche's and her own (philosophical) identities within an order of play is a good example of mimesis' supplementarity: by putting herself in-between the thought of Freud and Nietzsche, she generated a philosophical dialogue in which ideas and insights could float and affect each other, hereby short-circuiting questions about origin, authorship and authenticity. Her staging of the three-part play in turn allowed her to articulate ideas that exceeded any "one" theory that would be attached to "one" philosopher.

In "The Double Session," in *Dissemination* (1972; 1981a), one of the main sources of *Mimesis*, we see the idea of supplementation applied to theatrical performance and mime. This is interesting first and foremost because it not only subtly shifts the notion of mimesis from a question of truth (as corresponding to a unified conception of reality) to a question of play, but also urges us to redefine the idea of the "subject" of play. If we leave behind mimesis' binary logic, how do we account for the different functions, roles and forces that "do" the playing? What vocabulary do our main authors provide? As we shall see over the course of the three subsequent chapters, in the case of Derrida, the mimetic subject is the *locus* of the exchange of textual traces, in the case of Lacoue-Labarthe, the mimetic subject is the *dramatic play* of fiction and, finally, in the case of Irigaray, the subject of mimicry is the *feminine play* with the fiction of Woman. On all three accounts, we are working with a constant push-and-pull dynamic between French contemporary thought with its general interest in the idea of irreducible difference, on one hand, and a duplicitous, hybrid conception of mimesis internal to Plato's philosophy, on the other.

Derrida's deconstruction of the mime figure in his reading of Mallarmé's *Mimique* in "The Double Session" will be the conceptual starting point for this investigation. Thinking of the subject as mime and in terms of a "figuration" means to acknowledge the formative role of mimetic processes in the formation of the subject or self. At the same time, it questions the idea of the subject taking on a final shape or identity because of its mimetic acts. In other words, taking mimetic processes of the self seriously means leaving open "what that finally looks like," i.e., its result is open-ended and always overflowing in yet another figuration. The mimetic subject is not a "figure" in the self-identical and self-transparent sense, but subject to a variety of forms and figures simultaneously. These figurations are all singular in their productions of difference, but fluid and hybrid in their relation to others.

Methodologically, we are addressing these problematics through recuperating and reactivating the janus-faced notion of the mime actor. The modifying and modified structures of the mimetic self are perhaps most clearly expressed in the human figure of the theatre performer: he or she exposes the subjective possibility to differ from oneself, to have "the aptitude for all roles," as the influential eighteenth-century thinker Denis Diderot put it in *The Paradox of the Actor* (1957) and without having any "one" origin or ground. The mime functions not only as a metaphor for deconstructing the model/copy relation through texts — which is Derrida's main argument in "The Double Session" — but also indicates the playful and theatrical enactment of the subject deconstructing his or her own mimetic "self," its materialised processes of mimetism. This is expressed most vividly in the philosophies of Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray. Lacoue-Labarthe turns to Diderot for his account of paradox, revolving around the interplay between the actor's ontological "nothingness," on the one hand, and his or her aptitude for "all roles," on the other, which is exposed and exhibited on the theatre stage. In Irigaray, the mimetic processes underlying the umbrella-term "Woman" — the masculine figuration and determination of the female sex as materialised in women's everyday lives — will be exposed through a subversive mimicry in which affirmations of the feminine, also known as *parler-femme*, transfigure the underlying mimetic production processes of "Woman."

All three accounts of the mime suggest the idea of the subject who cannot but understand himself or herself as *already* being affected by mimetic processes or mimetisms. This puts the act of "mime" in a special light. As Derrida put it in "The Double Session": "the mime does not imitate any actual thing or action, any reality that is already given in the world, existing before and outside his own sphere," and yet "the relation of imitation and the value of adequation remain intact since it is still necessary to imitate, represent, or 'illustrate' the idea." (1981a, 194) Derrida's explanation of the mime's paradox, anticipating Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Diderot's paradox in *Typography*, shows that although the mime *simulates* imitation rather than being subjected to it, the mime's performance cannot escape alluding to the idea of adequation. The idea of the mime deconstructing himself or herself on the scene is expressed as a grappling with the tension of not duplicating reality with the knowledge that one is, as a human being, inevitably a *homo mimeticus*. There is always the connotation, the *trace* of appealing to notions of adequation and assimilation., which is an aspect of the human condition that one cannot simply erase.

CHAPTER 1

Mime and Mimodrama

Derrida’s Deconstruction of Mimesis in “The Double Session”

That is how the mime operates,
he […] sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction.

Mallarmé, Mimique

There is no imitation. The Mime imitates nothing.

Jacques Derrida, The Double Session

1. *Introduction*

In a roundtable discussion, printed in *La Quizaine Littéraire* of April 1976, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida reflect on the concept of mimesis and conclude that it is a principle that must be thought outside established categories.

> J.-L. N. — The question then becomes: what is thinking ‘outside the categories’? This is one of the questions of *Mimesis*, indeed.
>
> L. L. — Because, in a way, mimesis is not opposed to anything. Again, the new does not result from an opposition, as such, to the old. The whole problem is precisely to short-circuit this opposition.
>
> J. D. — It is not enough to protest against imitation or against repetition to escape the logic of mimesis. On the contrary. It is one of the demonstrations that we wanted to try. The request of the new, of the original, of the irruptive event […] submits itself somewhere to a system of identification to the producing god, to the act of a producing nature or of a creative freedom. The compulsion to look for breaks or ruptures or cuts everywhere does not only lead to an empiricist reading, of the history of philosophy in particular, to see irruptions where there are repetitions. This compulsion is itself under

> the law of mimesis. We are interested in another logic of the event. (Agacinski et al. 1976, 20; my translation)

Together with Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (and to a certain extent, Luce Irigaray), Derrida wants to counter two tendencies or "compulsions," as he calls them, implicated in a particular tradition of mimesis. The first compulsion is to see in the order of things only repetition: the new is always and all the time the same as the old. The second compulsion is to see in the new solely ruptures, deviations, breaks and cuts vis-à-vis the old. Both compulsions derive from a binary, Platonic model of mimesis, says Derrida: they express the inclination to structure the old and the new according to the primacy of the Same. The idea of the primacy of the Same entails setting up an oppositional structure between the Same (original) and the Other (copy) through which the identity and self-transparency of the Same is re-affirmed. How does this apply to the order of the old and the new? In the first example, the new is said to repeat the old without any variation, which is a metaphysical position according to which the old and the new coincide completely (sameness). In the second case, deviations and ruptures are understood in their antagonistic relation to the past, which implies a metaphysical position on the self-same nature of original freedom (i.e., ruptures are reintegrated in a unified and absolute notion of originality). Both compulsions are an expression of the desire to equate the binary old/new with mimesis as a model of the Same.

It is precisely this problematic, of short-circuiting the binary logic of mimesis structured around the principle of sameness, that will be at the centre of this chapter. Moreover, the collegial exchange above contains two elements that will help us orient our analysis and which I will reformulate here according to two main objectives. The first aim is to understand and conceptualise the resistance against a simple rejection of mimesis and, second, to make plausible Derrida's idea of "another logic of the event" that — although bypassing mimesis' binary structure— complies to mimesis.

Before we enter the chapter, a brief methodological remark. Much has been written about Derrida's deconstruction of linguistic discourse in the context of his work on the concept of mimesis in relation to Plato's philosophy.[18] This is reflected in the fact that Derrida's writings about mimesis can be found in several well-known works, such as *Of Grammatology* (1997), "Economimesis," (1975) and "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination* (1981a). These writings deal with the implications of Plato's conception of mimesis as representation concerning the written text. To a certain extent, the key work of this chapter, "The Double Session," originally published in *Tel Quel* (1971; DS from now on), later taken-up in *Dissemination*, is no exception: DS is structured around a supplementary reading of two texts, Mallarmé's *Mimique* and Plato's *Philebus*, with the aim to lay bare mimetic, non-representational, structures on a textual level.

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[18] For example, see Hobson, "Derrida and Representation: Mimesis, Presentation, and Representation," in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (2001)*,* Naas, *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (2003)*,* Wilson, "The Economimesis of New Historicism (Or How New Historicism Displaced Theory in English Literature Departments)" (2007), López Bernal, "Derrida and the Tragedy of Representation" (2017) Koci, "Transforming Representation: Jacques Derrida and the End of Christianity" (2019).

However, my main aim is to address the short-circuiting of Platonic mimesis also beyond the viewpoint of a textual deconstruction by highlighting the material convergence between body and text. For this reason, and following the recent mimetic turn, we will look at Derrida's figuration of *mime* because it allows us to examine the theatrical conditions — the dramatic formulae — underpinning the problematic of mimesis.[19] I will hence, in the first part, take some time to discuss the mime as introduced by the modernist poet and critic Maurice Mallarmé. Mallarmé introduced a pantomime in his 1897-piece, which radically shifted all preconceived notions of imitation and mimicry in relation to the theatre scene as well as the status of the text.[20] For example, instead of speaking about the mime's imitations, he speaks about the mime's "perpetual allusion [to imitation]" (Mallarmé 2007, 140). In doing so, he deviates from the dualistic conception of mimesis. He also seems to recuperate and reposition the function of the materiality of mimetic processes in relation to Plato's earlier books of the *Republic*, which will be an important element of our analysis. It is Mallarmé's artistic approach to address the deviations from simple imitation via the question of mime as "another logic of the event," as Derrida would say, that is particularly fitting and a challenging entry point to reinvest in the French post-war interest in mimesis.

As said, DS stands out because it deals with the overlap between body and text. The materiality of writing, the fact that it is a "thing" that one touches (the page) and, conversely, that has the potential to touch the reader (affect), is made palpable on more than one level.[21] The first level has to do with the fact that DS came about not as a published text but as an experimental seminar. At the beginning of the year 1969, the "Groupe d'études théoriques" organised a talk, provided by Derrida, in the context of a lecture series initiated by the Parisian journal *Tel Quel* (L. Hill 2007, 33). During this meeting, Plato's *Philebus* and Mallarmé's *Mimique* served as central texts and were dispersed in different locations in the room. First there were Derrida's personal notes, which were displayed on the blackboard. Then there was the handout, given to all participants, on which Plato's and Mallarmé's texts were printed side-by-side and folded in the middle. This material intervention dictated how the reading would proceed: not linear, not one after the other, but as a simultaneous reading in which the one served as the condition of the other:

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[19] For more on the so-called turn, or *re*-turn, to the concept of mimesis, see N. Lawtoo, "The Mimetic Condition: Theory and Concepts" (2022).

[20] The original text in French can be found in Mallarmé, *Divagations* (1897) and the English translation in Mallarmé, *Divagations* (2007).

[21] Esa Kirkkopelto argues that *Dissemination* is "Derrida's definitive book on theater." (2010, 73)

> On the page that each of you has (see figure III), a short text by Mallarmé, *Mimique*, is embedded in one corner, sharing or completing it, with a segment from the *Philebus*, which, without actually naming *mimesis*, illustrates the mimetic system and even defines it, let us say in anticipation, as a system of illustration. (Derrida 1981a, 183)

The point of this set-up was to deliberate over the supplementary nature of these texts: were they similar? In which sense? Can the texts be read as reflecting, mirroring, miming each other? What are the implications of these — on the surface superficial — differences? It was the physical staging of the double reading that provided the context for what only later became the title of the essay, "The Double Session." This very concrete, physical encounter is not just anecdotal but must be understood as the first layer of the *mise-en-scène* implicated in DS's reading. From a purely textual perspective, DS is a registration of a previous event, which was to a certain extent improvised. This poses the question what DS was referring to, exactly, if the event itself challenged the status of its own "script". This reverse-structure — first event, then script, *itself* an event, and so on — will be Derrida's formula of deconstructing mimesis: not binary, not linear, but enveloped in infinite textual reversals. In typical Derridean fashion: "Mallarme writes upon a white page on the basis of a text he is reading in which it is written that one must write upon a white page." (Derrida 1981a, 198) But again, this is only one layer of DS's performative dimension. In what follows we will explore other layers in which the materiality of the mime's play will be at the forefront.

In DS, we see for the first time and most concretely Derrida's attempt to formulate "another [mimetic] logic of the event" — than a binary one — through an examination of a mime piece written-up by the modernist poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé in 1897. DS revolves around *Mimique*, a short poetical text (it covers exactly one page) featuring a pantomime titled *Pierrot Murderer of His Wife*. The title "Mimique" is already significant. In a recent interview, American literary critic J. Hillis Miller reminds us that the French word "mimique," "doesn't exactly mean 'imitator', though it is linked to the concept of mimesis." (Lawtoo and Miller 2020, 95) Miller elaborates on mime as "the imitation in dance of some human action, what we might today call pantomime of that action. It didn't have anything to do with language, but with mime, in the sense of silent performance." (2020, 95)

This surprising statement, that the mime's silent performance is not necessarily about lacking language, will be highlighted in the first section of this chapter. The mime is not "lacking" anything because it does not comply to any pre-established reality, including a unified notion of language. This can be deduced from two insights established in *Mimique.* On the one hand, Margueritte, the mime who performs *Pierrot Murderer of his Wife*, seems to perform a script, that is, his actions seem to allude to an already written story. And yet, on the other hand, his mimed actions are described by Mallarmé as made up on the spot, i.e., his physical movements are improvised. This dual account short-circuits the question of language and imitation in equal measure, says Derrida. It is that undecided middle between reproduction and improvisation that the mime exhibits and that provides the dramatic formula for Derrida's account of mime and mimesis even beyond *Mimique.*

In the second section, I will apply this double-sided mimetism to two intersecting figurations illustrated by *Mimique*. The first figuration is mime as "the double inscription of mimesis" (Derrida 1981a, 186). Derrida considers mimesis as always complying to a double movement, never in terms of a stabilised unity. What is meant by movement in this context is the sense that there are always two intersecting processes of mimesis at play, not one after the other, but as interacting with and transforming each other continuously. It is a back-and-forth mechanism of two intersecting processes that qualifies the mime's "double inscription," as Derrida calls it. To properly understand what is meant by this, we must explain how this notion was first introduced by Plato in his conceptual distinction between imitation (good copy) and mime or simulation (bad copy), which will directly inform our investigation of the second figuration.

The second figuration of mime in *Mimique* that we will discuss and with which we will close this chapter, is the notion of mime as "setting up a medium of fiction." (Mallarmé 2007, 140) The qualification of mime-as-medium is not in itself revolutionary. One could make an analogy with marionettes, which are also characterised by mute gestures, merely passing on dramatical and/or comical codes mechanically without any unified *subjectum* intervening in the operation. In his influential essay *On the Marionette Theatre* (1972), Heinrich von Kleist writes: "What then […] are the requirements necessary to accomplish this technical skill? Nothing […] except what I have already observed here: symmetry, mobility, lightness." (1972, 23–24) Short-circuiting the question what or who is "behind" and thus authorising the puppet's evocations, Kleist's interlocutor explains that the puppet's theatre is about the technique of evoking "symmetry, mobility, lightness." In essence, for the puppet theatre to work, one does not have to account for a subjective "base" that would "execute" this performance. That there is someone holding the strings is presented as unimportant. Now this might feel somewhat counterintuitive with respect to the mime as — by comparison with a puppet — it is harder to fully negate the human aspect of the performer. And yet, formally, Mallarmé seems to argue for the exact same mediating, mechanical techniques as those configuring Kleist's marionettes.

This poses an interesting question as regards the status of the mime as human figure that we will not yet fully engage in in this chapter, but that we will discuss in Lacoue-Labarthe's investigation of the subject of mimesis in the second chapter, furthering Derrida's deconstructed mime.

2. There is No Imitation: The Mime Imitates Nothing

In comparison to the speaking actor, the mime lacks an intuitive relationship to language. Mallarmé's *Mimique* can be read as a playful elaboration on this idea. Although performing a story that one can easily follow and apprehend, Margueritte's miming of *Pierrot Murderer of his Wife*, which is at the centre of *Mimique*, is anything but an obvious presentation of a text. The mime Margueritte is using his silence for the differentiation of narratives, hereby complicating a unified understanding of the story: Pierrot, the central character, is presented as the narrator, but also as the "perpetrator" and the "victim" in the story. If the mime does not imitate anything in particular, then why does Mallarmé use "mimique" as the title for this pantomime? In this section, I will investigate this problematic by first briefly introducing *Pierrot Murderer of his Wife* and by close-reading short excerpts from Margueritte's original script. I will then turn to *Mimique* and explore the idea of the mime's ability to, simultaneously, hold up opposing — even contradictory — elements (drives, identities, passions…). These elements play out on several performative levels: what the original story is according to the script; the question of whether the narrator is inside or outside the story, and the problematic of gender identity as regards the characters assumed. Does the mime indeed function as a "phantom," as Mallarmé suggests? Following the genealogy of this concept — the phantom designates "image," from *imago*, meaning ghost or phantom, and goes all the way back to Plato —what role does this notion play in *Mimique*?

2.1 Pierrot Murderer of his Wife *& the Evocation of Opposites*

Pierrot is centred around the title character Pierrot who discovers (or *thinks* he discovers) that his wife, Columbine, has been unfaithful to him.[22] He decides to take revenge by murdering her for which he invents a couple of scenarios: hanging her ("of course there's always the rope, you pull it tight, snap, it's all over!"), stabbing her ("The knife? Or a sabre, a huge sabre? Slash! Through the heart ..."), poisoning her ("Poison? A tiny vial of nothing at all, swallow it and…"), or shooting her ("Of course there is always the gun, bang! But that bang! would be heard.") (Margueritte and Gerould 1979, 115). The first part of the pantomime consists of Pierrot evaluating these scenarios one by one. At some point he accidentally stumbles on a little inconsistency in the floor, he looks at his own foot, and spontaneously comes up with his answer: he must tickle her feet until she dies. He decides to tie Columbine's wrists and ankles to the bed so that he can tickle her feet until she dies due to her own excessive laughter. The crux of the pantomime is that the finale, where Columbine will be murdered by her husband, must be evoked entirely through Margueritte's solo performance. He must impersonate Pierrot *and* his Wife — the act of killing and the act of being killed — simultaneously. This results in a climactic, tragicomic mimed hysteria. Within a matter of seconds, Margueritte must switch back-and-forth between the roles of murderer and victim. The script, written by Margueritte himself, perfectly captures Pierrot's evoked mania:

> And now, let's tickle: Colombine, you're the one who's going to pay for that. (And he tickles recklessly, he tickles savagely, he tickles anew, he tickles without respite, then he flings himself onto the bed and becomes Colombine once more. She (he) writhes in frightful gaiety. One of her (his) arms gets free and frees the other arm, and these two arms, in a state of dementia, curse Pierrot. She (he) bursts into a laugh, veritable, strident, mortal; and raises herself (himself) part way; and tries to fling herself (himself) out of the bed; and her (his) feet keep on dancing, tickled, tortured, epileptic. These are the death-pangs. She (he) rises up once or twice-the supreme spasm-opens her (his) mouth for a final curse, and lets fall backwards, outside the bed, her (his) drooping head and arms. Pierrot becomes Pierrot once again. (Margueritte and Gerould 1979, 116).

Margueritte must evoke this double act through gesture and facial expression, coming very close to the earlier mentioned ancient *mîmos* with its emphasis on the bodily display of specified qualities. His physical appearance must make apparent that we are dealing with (at least) two contrasting people, bodies, genders, and desires. Mallarmé is interested in precisely these *in-between* modes: "tainted with vice yet sacred, between desire and fulfilment, perpetration and remembrance; here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past." (Mallarmé 2007, 140) The pantomime plays with the confusion of opposites. Are we looking at a murder or is it in fact suicide? Are we looking at a man or a woman? Are Margueritte's gestures miming what is happening now, showing us what has just happened, or are his actions anticipations of what is to come? In Mallarmé's *Mimique*, these options are left wide open: "that is how the mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror." (Mallarmé 2007, 140) The story of the pantomime is presented not so much as a linear narrative as that which unfolds in and through the performance of these multiple layers, and the continuities and discontinuities between them. Past, present, and future fuse and yet they do not fully overlap.

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[22] The pantomime piece was created by Paul Margueritte at the end of the 19th century, at the verge of the fin-de-siècle "Pierrotmania," reviving the comedic figure of Pierrot from the tradition of Commedia dell'arte (Weiss 1999, 33). For a historical overview of this figure as literary metaphor, mask and stage character, see for example Robert F. Storey, *Pierrot A Critical History of a Mask (*2014).

In line with the origins of the ancient mime, where story and character are not necessarily imitated but rather evoked or suggested through various modifications of the body and the voice, *Mimique* allows for a particularly *dramatic* (rather than illustrative) understanding of the event. It captures that inimitable play of opposites as it rephrases Margueritte's movements.[23] Like the pantomime, Mallarmé is not just imitating, interpreting, or commenting on Margueritte's piece. His aim is instead to simulate through evocation that same confusion of opposites as if partaking in the mime that Margueritte had started. He is miming the schizo-writing of *Pierrot* through yet another form of writing, which blurs the lines between the two texts. They are in dialogue or — as Derrida would say — supplementary to each other.

In DS, Derrida suggests that there is yet another textual layer added to this. The layers that are superimposed on each other in *Mimique* implicate other texts by Mallarmé in which similar maniacal figures within the history of drama are on display. *Mimique* anticipates other mimes that are not as such present in the text, but that are nevertheless evoked because of similar schizoid articulations.[24] These are virtually made possible, says Derrida, due to the *whiteness* of the mime's face paint:

> Through all the surfaces superimposed white on white, between all the layers of Mallarméan make-up, one comes across, every time, on analysis, the substance of some "*drowned grease paint*" (*The Chastised*

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[23] My starting point for mime is the etymological meaning of *mimêsis*, coming from *mimesthai*, which is linked to *mîmos* (mime, actor) whose performance is characteristically closest to song and dance. For the variety and multi-dimensional character of mimetic enactment going back to ancient times, see Gerald Else, *'Imitation' in the Fifth Century* (1958), Göran Sörbom, *Mimesis and Art* (1966), Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (2009), and on the problem of distinguishing between mime and pantomime in antiquity, see T. P. Wiseman, "'Mime' and 'Pantomime': Some Problematic Texts," in *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime* (2011, 146-53), edited by Edith Hall and Rosie Wyles.

[24] I use the term "schizo" or "schizoid" beyond its use in psychiatry. I am interested in the word in the context of the postmodern focus on the abandonment or deconstruction of clear-cut, delineated, and self-transparent concepts of identity, self and body as expressed by Derrida as well as Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari develop their conception of "schizoanalysis" in *Anti-Oedipus* (2004 (1972)) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988 (1980)).

> *Clown* [*Le Pitre châtié*].[25] One can read, each within the other, the Pierrot of *Mimique* and the "*bad Hamlet*" of the *Chastised Clown.* Pierrot is brother to all the Hamlets haunting the Mallarméan text. If one takes account of the crime, incest, or suicide in which they are all simultaneously engaged, then it is the ghost of a castrated point. (Derrida 1981a, 195)

From these short fragments in *Pierrot* and *Mimique*, we can see that the mime is presented both as text and as body. . Additionally, the mime is characterised as navigating between paradoxical states, "texts or "scripts". In what follows, I will address the ontological implications of this problematic by analysing the idea of the mime as a "blank page" and its underpinned phantomic powers.

2.2 Mime as Blank Page & the Idea of the Phantom

Derrida uses a couple of key concepts in the quoted passage above: surface, white, make-up, haunting, ghost. For Derrida, the mime's white-painted face signals its lack of original features: what the mime displays are not his or her own but rather come from elsewhere. Moreover, the whiteness signifies two things that have to do with the nature of its face: first, that it is a blank surface unto which you can *inscribe* whatever feature and, second, that the white paint is a *mask*, i.e., there is always an element of trickery or fiction involved. Now, according to Derrida, what this double definition makes possible is a "mimetic machinery," as he calls it, of substitution and supplementation.[26] Because, although the blank surface allows for all kinds of inscriptions, it must nevertheless always remain a blank surface. In other words, the mime's face is a surface that does not allow for any one feature to hold-on to its "self" and become its final ground:

> [It] represents the affirmation of this nonorigin, the remarkable empty locus of a hundred blanks no meaning can be ascribed to, in which mark supplements and substitution games are multiplied *ad infinitum.* (Derrida 1981a, 268)

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[25] *The Chastised Clown* [*Le Pitre châtié*] is a poem by Mallarmé. A first version of the poem dates from 1964. Henry Weinfield's English translation can be found in *Collected poems: A Bilingual Edition* (Mallarmé 2010).

[26] The notion of substitution is also central in Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy of mimesis and the mime. In his most well-known essay on mimesis, *Typography*, central to our second chapter, Lacoue-Labarthe writes about the relationship between substitution, vicariousness and circulation: "[…] if the 'essence' of mimesis were not precisely about vicariousness, carried to the limit […], endless and groundless—something like an infinity of substitution and *circulation*." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 116)

In the context of the textual traces in *Pierrot* and *Mimique*, the mime's white surface is a substitute not only for an infinite number of characters (Pierrot, Hamlet, the clown's Hamlet…) but also, Derrida suggests, for specific gender-related acts like incest, murder, and suicide. Why? Because these acts are on the mime's display in terms of their interconnectedness, i.e., as the exploration of drives, passions, articulations of the body and the psyche that come from elsewhere and that are in turn projected unto the future. These "texts" never find their stable "home" in one body or one psyche, but rather, they constitute a network of texts that can be provoked by a manifold of bodies and psyches. Derrida hence argues that the point of the figure of the mime is to show that insofar as there is a ground for text that ground is insinuated, suggested, *mimed*, just like the white facial paint of the mime suggests a face but isn't really one. The mime is merely the "locus" around which a play of traces revolves.

The reason why Mallarmé's text is called *Mimique* even though it side-lines imitation is because there still is a profound logic of mimesis at play, says Derrida: that of the exchange of textual traces, which might suggest an original and copy, but that can never stabilise them as such as all signs of an assumed identity and origin in *Mimique* are diverted. Mallarmé writes: "he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction" which brings us back to the notion of the white mask. What does the mime's face show *exactly*? Is it reflecting, mirroring, expressing, emoting, dramatizing? Derrida does not really go into the (phenomenological) details of the mime's performance, but with Lacoue-Labarthe, we might interpret this statement as setting up a "false or two-way mirror," which he further explains in *Typography*: "a mirror is installed, right in the middle where everything comes to be reflected without exception" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 92).[27] *Mimique* is not only mirroring (and haunted by) previous texts, which appear in the face of the mime as shadows or ghosts, but in turn will also haunt future events that recuperate similar scenarios. The mime is that medium, that double-sided mirror in-between scripts that not only sustains the logic of exchange but also stages it as a fiction.

It is inevitable to point out how the white pantomime challenges what we described in the introduction as a metaphysics of presence. In *Pierrot* as well as *Mimique*, the writing is designed to evoke the fusion of past, present, and future and yet as not fully overlapping. As becomes clear in the beginning of the script of *Pierrot*, the conjuncture of different timeframes is the result of the fact that the whole piece starts with Margueritte being on stage as Pierrot and *remembering* the event of him killing his wife.[28] In other words, the audience or the reader is immediately catapulted back in time and henceforth knows about the killing even before the whole event has started. However, this is not without complications.

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[27] This phrase must be contextualised within Lacoue-Labarthe's critique on Plato's mirror logic and the static *theoria* it entails. With *Mimique*, we have a medium of pure fiction and are on the side of Plato's enemy, the poet. This can be understood against the background of the so-called "quarrel" between philosophy and poetry as mentioned in the introduction.

When one reads a script for the stage, one imagines, while reading, the scenes being played out by the performer(s) on stage. To a certain extent, the script of *Pierrot* allows for this kind of imagining: we can differentiate between the mime's gestured choreography and the director's notes as they are placed between parentheses and hence indicate subtext. However, there are moments in the script where the writer, Margueritte, takes over and addresses the reader directly. This poses the question how this is to be achieved by a performer on stage. What is possible in a script or a film with editing is not as evidently possible in real life. Reversing past, present and future or breaking character in the middle of a scene to address the audience as the writer, can in a text easily be accomplished with a few phrases, but seeing a performance unfold on the stage must comply to the laws of space and time. Hence this makes one wonder whether Margueritte's script really is meant as a script to be performed, or rather as a piece of text that is to be read.

Derrida indeed argues in DS that it is this (ontological) in-between status of *Pierrot* that attracted Mallarmé to the pantomime in the first place. Namely, that *Pierrot* was nothing more than a phantom, a "fiction-script" so to say. The script evoked the possibility of a real-life theatre event but, as suggested by the narrational shifts, it is constantly interrupted by signs that tell us that it is the script *itself* that must be accounted for as the pantomime's staging. From this point of view, it could have been exactly Margueritte's intention to let the script hover above the question of reality and fiction, to confuse the reader about the script's purpose. What Mallarmé in turn did in *Mimique* was precisely simulating that phantom-like status: not imitating an original but setting up a script that behaves like a haunted ghost, a "pure fiction."

With this as a background, Derrida argues that the qualification of mime as a white mask, a blank surface, a ghost or a phantom, have their root in a dual relationship to mimesis. The first is the idea that the act of miming is silent, which short-circuits the question of presence through the emergence of *logos*. The second is the idea that — although not imitating a pre-existing reality — the mime plays with the reader's or audience's *expectation* of imitation. Hence Derrida's phrase that the "mime imitates nothing" but rather "mimes imitation" (Derrida

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[28] "Whew! (He sways, folds double, strides over a chair and falls back into it on seat, in a swoon. The undertaker's man rubs his hands vigorously, Pierrot revives.) Over there! Look! Colombine! She's smiling, how graceful she looks! (His extended points to the portrait.) What eyes, what a pretty little nose! what a mouth ... Dead. And we have just come back from down there where we consigned her to the earth." (Margueritte and Gerould 1979, 114)

1981a, 149, 219). It is important, before we move on to the next section, to properly understand the mime's paradoxical relationship with mimesis. I hope it is clear at this point how, textually, *Mimique* does not unequivocally refer to the script of *Pierrot*, and that even that script does not unequivocally refer to any actual live performance. In this context, it is intelligible how Derrida can frame the mime as a figuration that has in fact nothing to do with imitation in the most intuitive sense of the word. On the other hand, I hope I have also made clear that there is nevertheless a mimetic structure at play in the act of *writing*. And here we are confronted with the overlap between text and body. The act of writing is, in all texts discussed, used in a dual manner: on the one hand, as a description of the pantomime's body "writing" its movements on the stage. This physical choreography evokes the script in the audience's mind, but without there "actually" being a script. On the other hand, there is the "writing" of the script on a page alluding to other texts. The page is blank and will remain blank in an ontological sense throughout the mime's writing. Whether we envisage that page with written words on it or as a performer with a white-painted face, on this level of argumentation, they are evocations of the exact same mimetic logic or "mimetological 'machine'" (Derrida 1981a, 190).[29]

3. Figurations of the Mime

In the previous section, we discussed some of the leading elements in Derrida's deconstruction of Mallarmé's text, as well as the pantomime that is central to it. In what follows, I show how, according to Derrida, the mime's dual attitude towards the concept of mimesis (as we have seen) has its roots in Plato. Derrida puts forward some passages from Plato's dialogues, which, in his view, constitute the basic logic for the paradoxical ontological status of the mime, as illustrated by *Mimique*. In my analysis, it will become clear that Derrida's reading of Plato is meant as a redoubling and dislocation of a metaphysics that assigns mimesis a dualistic place. But I also show how Derrida's reading exposes a concept of dramatization or theatricality that he does not elaborate as such, but which nevertheless stands out and demands clarification in relation to mime as a dramatizing figure. I address this issue through two figurations of mime from *Mimique* with which we are now familiar: 1) the double inscription of mimesis and 2) setting up a medium of fiction.

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[29] Derrida uses this concept in a footnote dedicated to Denis Diderot's account of mimesis. In the second chapter, I will elaborate on the subjective dimension of Derrida's notion of the 'mimetological machine,' within the context of Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*.

3.1 Figuration No. 1: The Double Inscription of Mimesis

In a footnote in DS, Derrida supplements his deconstruction of *Mimique* with a dissection of the etymological root of mimesis, the Greek word *mimesthai*, from the earlier dialogues of the *Republic*:

> If we go back to mimesis 'prior' to the philosophical 'decision,' we find that Plato, far from linking the destiny of art and poetry to the structure of mimesis (or rather to the structure of all of what people today often translate—in order to reject it—as re-presentation, imitation, expression, reproduction, etc.), disqualifies in mimesis everything that 'modernity' makes much of: the mask, the disappearance of the author, the simulacrum, anonymity, apocryphal textuality. This can be verified by rereading the passage in *The Republic* on simple narration and mimesis (393a ff). What is important for our purposes here is this 'internal' duplicity of the *mimeisthai* that Plato wants to cut in two, in order to separate good mimesis (which reproduces faithfully and truly yet is already threatened by the simple fact of its duplication) from bad, which must be contained like madness (396a) and (harmful) play (396e). (1981a, 186–87)

Derrida dislocates Plato's problematic of mimesis as simple imitation by drawing attention to the ancient function and (at the time) general understanding of *mimesthai*, which comes from the word *mîmos*, meaning mime actor. According to Derrida, in the origin and history of the word *mimethai*, we can trace an internal duplicity of mimesis, which Plato "wants to cut in two": there is either a possibility that the imitator imitates and reproduces faithfully or that the imitator mimes, in which case he or she simulates reproduction (also known under the rubric of the simulacrum or the bad copy). But this is no more than a *mimed* opposition, says Derrida. The fact that both possibilities are implicated in the etymological meaning of *mimesthai* makes of that first option, faithful reproduction, in se also a case of mime. Faithful reproduction always comes down to the problematic of mime because one can never know whether the reproduction has any lineage with a model, or whether it is a mere replica of another replica, i.e., a reproduction of what Plato qualifies as "nothing," since a copy is nothing without its imitation of a model. So, by deconstructing mimesis' internal duplicity, Derrida exposes an internal difference in Plato's mimesis that recalls our earlier discussion on Derrida's notion of the mime's so-called logical machinery.

As we have seen, Derrida argues that the distinction between faithful reproduction and miming that Plato speaks of are not *as such* implicated in the historical meaning of *mimesthai*. Plato turns the general function of *mimesthai* into a dual concept predicated on imitation so that he can distinguish between good and bad copies. As we know from several sources displayed in the introduction, however, ancient usages of the word *mimesthai* are not necessarily structured around the dualistic model of imitation. Mime was understood in ancient times as a particular genre of dramatic enactment but even in that modality it did not have to refer to a mime script in terms of representational content. In Sörbom's historical account, *mimesthai*

> has got a wider use, namely to exhibit something vividly and concretely by means of typical or characterising qualities. In fact, none of the occurrences from the fifth and fourth centuries (no earlier occurrences are known apart from the Homeric hymn to the Delian Apollo of uncertain date) carries the technical sense 'to perform a mime'. (Sörbom 1966, 38)

For Sörbom, the ancient function of *mimesthai* lies more in the direction of a vivid, playful exhibition of "characterising qualities" without there being any division between reality and fiction, or the sense of a truthful reproduction of a pre-established model. Sörbom: "*mimesthai* […] got from the very beginning when it was coined, a wider and looser usage; it may have meant, originally, "'to behave like a mime actor' or 'to behave as people do in the mimes"' (Sörbom 1966, 38). It is the very general idea of a vivid manner of enactment that people understood as *mimesthai*. It refers to mime as a genre but, at the same time, it is not delimited to a pre-established dramatic context as people in everyday life can be called *mimesthai* simply because of them behaving "like a mime actor". And yes indeed, Görbom supplements, this is a precursor for what later became known as a similarity relation, but this was not essentially what *mimesthai* entailed:

> The truthfulness of the similarity relation (i.e., an actual correspondence of essential qualities) between model and representation is not the most important thing, as in portraits, but the power to realize a type of phenomenon by means of a choice of typical and characterizing qualities. (Sörbom 1966, 27)

With this historical context in mind, we see more clearly how much Plato intervened, conceptually, in the original understanding of *mimesthai*. He *inscribed* two definitions into the concept of *mimesthai* to stabilise and control what was at the time a multi-faceted, fluid and very broadly used term.

The question now is what Plato's intervention has to do with the idea of a mimetological machine. According to Derrida, we must understand Plato's "double inscription" of mimesis as informed by the question of morality. When Plato establishes a distinction between imitation and simulation in the later books of *Republic*, he introduces a difference based on duality that, from then on, will provide the conceptual frame, the "machinery" in Derrida's words, for all future conceptualisations of morality and immorality based on Plato's thought and according to which terms such as hysteria, madness, femininity, plasticity, hybridity, fluidity and animality are characterised and categorised: the dualist account of mimesis can from now on be used as an ontological ground for saying that these qualifications are immoral for the simple reason that they fall outside of the model/copy dichotomy.

It is a moral concern which underpins Plato's views on mimesis.[30] But conversely, it is also mimesis that informs his discussion on what is good and bad: morality is based on the question whether this or that is a true representation of — whether it is "truly" participating in — a universal Form. According to Plato, the interaction between the realm of Forms and the realm of physical materiality is one of mimesis. The material world is intelligible based on its mimetic relation to, or participation [*methexis*] in, the universal Forms. So, a large part of what is generally described as Platonic metaphysics depends on Plato's account of mimesis. If certain behaviour falls outside of mimesis' binary opposition than this will be a justification of categorising that behaviour as immoral (or even driven by an irrational pathos). Based on this logic, *mimesthai* is by definition improper (without properties) and immoral because it cannot be stabilised by a dualist opposition.

Derrida argues that this causes a major problem for Plato. A metaphysics in which one converges a dualist account of mimesis with morality has an *aporia* build-in. Since mimesis comes from *mimesthai* — again, connected to *mîmos* or mime — Plato's distinction between what is good and bad cannot but circle around the principle of *mime*, *dramatic enactment,* and *play* (Plato's "decision" on allowing good copies does not make any difference). The point being that it is Plato who sets up this machinery. Plato's "double inscription of mimesis" is not a description of reality (be it material or intelligible), but a philosophical rationale that has laid the groundwork for a Platonic legacy "with which ancient Neoplatonists, Renaissance idealists, romantics, and many others have wrestled in their different ways." (Halliwell 2009, 38) In any case, Derrida's main argument is that this machinery, generated by Plato's double inscription of mimesis, produces the condemnation of the duplicity or internal difference of *mimesthai* while simultaneously needing that notion, conceptually, for the machinery to work.[31]

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[30] Nancy, the third member of the "three musketeers" of deconstruction (in Derrida's words), also underlines the pedagogical concern. In one of the last interviews that he gave in Leuven, Belgium, he said that, since Plato, "philosophy is interested in mimesis because it demands a good mimesis, an intelligent mimesis, a mimesis that knows what it does when it imitates. Thus, one could say that, for philosophy, that is, for rational thinking, there is immediately a necessity to carry out an orthopaedics of mimesis. Because everything that for philosophy, for Plato, precedes philosophy, i.e., myth, poetry, perhaps what we call art in general, constitutes a domain, of mimesis. That is to say, of a relationship to figures and models. […] One cannot forget that Greek education before Plato, and even before the sophists, one should say, was an education based on the imitation of figures that are heroes, or at least historical or legendary heroes or semi-gods." (Lawtoo 2020)

[31] See in this context also Derrida's work on the "pharmakon," being both poison and cure, in "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination* (1981c).

As is well known, Derrida is not out necessarily to critique Plato but rather to bring implicit mechanisms in his thinking to the surface. With Derrida, we can indeed ask the question whether the mere rejection of mimesis is a problem that can truly be attributed to Plato. Because we also know that aporia — a suspension of the discussion — is a crucial and recurring element in Plato's dialogues, which suggests that Plato might have been aware of the undecidability at the heart of *mimesthai* and its structural undermining of the gesture to stabilise mimesis. Derrida also does not dismiss Plato's moral concerns. At the same time, through Derrida's deconstructive reading, we are invited to ask the question whether it is not paradoxical (if not ironic) that mime should be the ultimate target of Plato's moral concerns. Plato's famous resolution on the matter — that ultimately all things mimetic are to be distrusted and preferably excluded from the city— only re-establishes Plato's logical machinery.

With all this in mind, we can now revisit and re-evaluate the dramatic roots of our earlier discussion on Derrida's reading of Mallarmé's *Mimique*. Derrida brought to the fore a dramatic trace in the ancient conception of *mimesthai* that is not absent in Plato but that is, instead, the very linchpin around which his logical distinction between imitation and mime gravitates. It is that very broad understanding of *mimesthai* as vivid and dramatic enactment that is, conceptually, pushed to its limits by first Margueritte and later Mallarmé and Derrida. Both *Mimique* and *DS* illustrate or indeed mime, in terms of vividly enacting, that mimetological machine, as originally set up by Plato. Ifwe take seriously the notion of *mimesthai* we must also keep open the possibility of its internally produced forms of critique, intervention, and commentary. If mime is completely disengaged from any form of realistic representation, if it lets go of any pretence of truth and is only concerned with performing, dramatizing without any preconceived goal, then this presupposes an intervention in reality as a concept that is univocally intelligible. And this is *also* the legacy of Plato.

3.2 Figuration No. 2: Setting up a Medium of Fiction

Through our discussion on the notion of *mimesthai*, we can now assess Mallarmé's phrase of the mime setting up a "pure medium of fiction" in a new light. On a purely textual level we might say that Plato's logical construction of setting up "imitation" against "mime" is exemplary of "setting up a pure medium of fiction." And I think it is mainly on this level of argumentation that Derrida develops his thought: Plato creates a fictional logic of sameness and otherness, which must in turn function as proof of the unitary root of that opposition, which can only lead to an impasse or aporia. This is what he inscribes in his dual conception of mimesis. This is also reminiscent of the Platonic link between writing as a mimesis of speech, as we established in the introduction. However, in the process Derrida has laid bare another line of thought that reaches beyond the mere deconstruction of texts underpinned by a Platonic metaphysics. Fundamentally what is at stake is the idea that mime appeals to a specifically dramatic interpretation of fiction. In assessing the phrase "setting up a fiction," we must radically abandon all associations with the falsifying elements of fantasy, dream, phantom, simulation… because the logical ground of the univocality and self-identity of reality has proved untenable. What account of theatricality and dramatic enactment can we propose instead? What "other" figurations of fiction are there?

In DS, Derrida writes:

> The Mime imitates nothing. And to begin with, he doesn't imitate. There is nothing prior to the writing of his gestures. Nothing is prescribed for him. No present has preceded or supervised the tracing of his writing. His movements form a figure that no speech anticipates or accompanies. They are not linked with *logos* in any order of consequence. '*Such is this PIERROT MURDERER OF HIS WIFE.*' (Derrida 1981a, 194–95)

The mime imitates nothing but nevertheless complies to the act of writing. What is the nature of this writing?[32] We have seen that, in Derrida's reading of *Mimique*, body and text overlap which means that there is a deconstructive move insinuated by Derrida also with respect to the mime as materialised figure: the writing is as much the inscription of a text as that of the performing body. We also said that on a linguistic level, this overlap between body and text is not causing any conceptual problems, but can (and should) we not also account for this convergence outside or beyond the boundaries of language? Is Derrida not, despite the theatricality of his staged reading, downplaying the presence of the performing body? That is, should we not attempt to answer the question what makes the transfer from the script to the actual stage possible, taking the concreteness of the theatre situation seriously from a phenomenological point of view?

We see such an attempt in Samuel Weber's *Theatricality as Medium* (2004). Weber accounts for Derrida's "move" from textual discourse to theatrical performance by highlighting the ambiguity of the word "entre" in *Mimique*:

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[32] See in this context also J. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," and the critique of Plato's *Phaedrus* it entails.

> In repeating and remarking the ambiguity of the word entre in Mallarme's text, a word that can be read as both adjective ("be-tween") and verb ("enter"), Derrida moves from a purely "theoretical" discourse, describing an object independent of it, to a "theatrical" mode of (re)writing that stages (dislocates) what it also recites: the theatrical movement of Mallarme's writing. (Weber 2004, 14)

Weber accounts for the theatricality, the "staging," in and of Derrida's DS through its "repeating" of the syntactic use of Mallarmé's "entre," stating that "if *entre* is read as a verb here, its syntactical placement at the start of the phrase makes it into an injunction rather than a simple indicative: '*Let* Mallarme's text *enter*." (2004, 14) This means that reading DS, in spatial terms, opens a "stage" or "scene" that is dislocated from yet connected to the materiality of the written text: DS not only exposes that ambiguous space between him and Mallarmé but also with respect to *Mimique*'s doubled and deferred position vis-à-vis itself. In short, displacement through repetition is Weber's ground for Derrida's "account of theatrical performance." (2004, 13) Derrida is "setting up its own theatrical quality as a "staging" or *mise en scène,* rather than as an essentially constative reading of something held to exist independently of it." (2004, 14) As regards Weber's point that DS is not taking *Mimique* as an independent object of theorisation: we have shown this on the basis of Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's conception of mimesis through his reading of *Mimique*. The question remains, however, whether the singularity and specificity of the theatricality of the mime as a dramatic figure is hereby exhaustively explained.

In my view, Weber's focus on syntax and lack of engagement with the social and dramatic conditions of the theatre, for example, that it is a live encounter with an audience centred around a performer who has to come up with specific practical solutions, makes Weber's account of the theatre somewhat limited.[33] Bringing back the ancient roots of the *mimesthai*, we can see more clearly the dramatic tradition of mime, which can be a starting point to view that deferred presence, that fiction, as a form of *dramatization*. The mime's "theatre-writing" must also be questioned on the level of the performer's enactment as the locus of human subjectivity and its appeal to *logos* (which is not the same as arguing for a humanist account of theatre). What does it mean, concretely, for the mime actor to be engaged in a "double inscription of mimesis"? How is the mime both the author and the object of his or her own script?[34] In short, where does the mime's passage between the theoretical and the bodily become the opening of a different or "other" staging of mimesis? As we will see in forthcoming chapters, both Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray take up this precise task, whether it is through Lacoue-Labarthe's furthering of the deconstruction of the mime via the paradoxical status of the actor or Irigaray's exploration of the subversive dimension of mimicry through the feminine/receptacle.

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[33] In "On the Structure of the Scenic Encounter," Esa Kirkkopelto also stresses the philosophical importance of the notion of the actor in the problematic outlined by Weber: "At the same time, however, it brings along a question which, in the theatrical context, appears as most natural but which, philosophically, is most arduous – namely the question of the actor." (2010, 78)

[34] According to Kirkkopelto, it matters whether we speak of the mime as a mute figure, which seems central in DS and *Mimique*, or the actor as a speaking subject. In the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, Kirkkopelto finds a philosophical entry into the speaking subject on the stage: Lacoue-Labarthe is able to give a voice to the social appeal of the dramatic actor, which is to contain "the most extreme aspects of our existence." (Kirkkopelto 2010,

We might have reached the limit of Derrida's terminological reach. Derrida is quite obviously not interested in mime as a genre or in the practice of the mime as actor. This is illustrated by the fact that DS's central insights on the absence of imitation and the white-painted face are generally investigated in their structural and textual context. However, this does not negate the fact that there are affective, physical encounters at the basis of not only DS (its inception was a partially improvised seminar), but also *Mimique*, which recalls an element of theatre. From Margueritte's candid reports on his practice as an amateur pantomime, for example, we know that his creation of Pierrot came about as an obsession, which he managed to convert into a consistent training for the stage.[35] He was moved and challenged as a performer by the emotional extremities a mime like Pierrot could reach, calling out the "pathos of this mask" (Daniel Gerould 1979, 106). It completely took over his professional life, and yet he approached this affective encounter with professionalism and practical distance. In the second chapter, we will see Lacoue-Labarthe taking up that exact same paradoxical attitude as regards the actor, based on his reading of Diderot's well-known *Paradox of the Actor*, which was in turn very much inspired by Derrida's DS.

But there is yet another level on which one must acknowledge the live element of mimetic creation. In contrast to what Derrida believed (or wanted to stress), Mallarmé had seen Margueritte performing the mime many times. He was deeply involved in the production of *Pierrot* as Margueritte was not only his young nephew but also his next-door neighbour.[36] In

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80) In the second chapter, I will continue this discussion based on Lacoue-Labarthe's plastic and paradoxical account of the mime actor. I think it is significant that, although he keeps the speaking actor in mind, he still frequently uses the notion of mime as the matrix of fictioning. In my view this has to do with the fact that mime allows him to account for the plasticity and malleability of the theatre actor (this applies to both the actor's physique as his or her provocation of *logos*). On the relation between mimesis, plasticity and the mime, see also Nidesh Lawtoo, "The Plasticity of Mimesis" (2017b).

[35] "These peripeteia without a voice, this rhythm of emotions translated into an eternal silence: the expressive anguish of a being who is unable to speak, who, while making himself understood, cannot express everything, and who is pursued by a relentless fatality for that very reason. Hence, the pathos of this mask where the power of a convulsed soul takes refuge." (Daniel Gerould 1979, 106)

[36] In his introduction to *Pierrot*, Gerould elaborates on Mallarmé's involvement in the theatre at Valvins: "Their next-door neighbors and relatives, Stéphane Mallarmé and his daughter Geneviève, contributed to the unusual atmosphere. The great symbolist poet (the boys' uncle on Madame Margueritte's side) not only wrote a sonnet of inauguration for the theatre and a prolog for Pathelin, but he also worked intimately on all aspects of the productions themselves. […] For Mallarmé, too, the theatre at Valvins proved to be an important influence. The poet's active participation in the productions helped him develop his ideas about a small coterie theatre […] In

that capacity he helped building a local amateur theatre for Margueritte in Valvins to perform in. In other words, on a practical level Mallarmé in part served as the condition for the staging of the piece and to be enjoyed by a live audience. This history makes the reading of *Mimique* moving because, even if on a textual level *Mimique* is referring to Margueritte's written script (which is the working principle of Derrida's argumentation), it captures the affective undertones, the *mimesthai*, of a physical event in which Mallarmé was implicated on a fundamental level. Given the dramatic dimension of Derrida's textual staging in DS, these elements should not be dismissed as mere anecdotal evidence, but instead assumed to be the very point of view from which that textual staging could emerge in the first place. Importantly, with this we have by no means relapsed into a naive, nostalgic sentiment that once again seeks a definitive origin of mimesis. On the contrary, we have merely shifted our attention from Derrida's written staging to that of the affective traces of theatre. These do not exist independently of each other but must be differentiated, nonetheless.

4. Conclusion

Almost all of Derrida's notions of mime in DS can be derived from the tension between the textual production of the relation between original and copy, and the extraction of 'being' or 'presence' when text finds its materialisation. With the textual production of imitation, Derrida means that every interaction with text or writing alludes to a similarity relation. This allusion is at the same time a mechanism of masking: it suggests a relation between copy and original, but, like the white-painted face of the mime, only as veiled or a fiction. I will specify this point. A written script, as it appears in *Pierrot* and *Mimique*, can only mime or evoke a model of imitation, but it cannot be put forward as the ultimate representation, author, or agent of that model. Why not? Because the materialised text in the form of a mime will always — even in its production of imitation — be ontologically a blank page, without a ground. Following his deconstructive take on the trace, the pharmakon, and play in other texts, Derrida considers the mime as the figure par excellence to investigate processes that have their origin completely independently of representation. His idea of the mime's simultaneous "writing" and "being-written" is an original conception of mimetism that allows us moreover — anticipating Lacoue-Labarthe — to consider that what occupies the body and the psyche of a person cannot be considered in terms of stable faculties or properties. Instead, mimetic traces are

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fact, both Mallarmé and the peasants at Valvins loved *Pierrot Assassin of His Wife*, the pantomime that Paul Margueritte created for the first season of their theatre." (1979, 104–5) layers of the self that are constantly shifting, passing through, multiplying through rhythms, melodies, and performative repetitions. Against this backdrop, the primacy of 'being' and 'presence', which underpins Plato's metaphysical conception of mimesis as imitation, is fully side-lined. The material basis of mime can show its mechanisms of production without recourse to an independent and one-dimensional conception of reality divided into past, present, and future as a linear succession of moments.

Viewed from the perspective of the physical facticity of the mime, the question remains open as to which subjective ground can effectively deconstruct its own connection with mimetic processes. Derrida has drawn attention to the dramatic principle of *mimesthai* with his deconstruction of Plato's "double inscription of mimesis." In the next chapter, this return to Plato, and the broad, anthropological conception of *mimesthai*, will be further explored, specifically from the point of view of the mime as an actor. Deeply influenced by Derrida's writings, DS in particular, Lacoue-Labarthe decided halfway through his philosophical-theoretical career to develop his interest in the theatre and the actor by working in the theatre himself. Suddenly confronted with the production process of the theatre and the presence of the actor on the stage, he gained new courage to commemorate mimesis within the context of the theatre. This gives us the opportunity to conceptually question Derrida's impulse towards and intuition around the mime as a dramatic figure. We do this by looking at the actor who is characterized by a double movement: he or she writes his or her own script live on the stage (we remember that the mime is never a copy of a pre-written script) and at the same time he or she is the materialization of its result. In addition, we will look at how the dramatic or theatrical context responds to and generates the affective elements in the mime's script.

CHAPTER 2

Passons au théâtre

Lacoue-Labarthe and the Miming of the Subject

It is wholly possible to mime without a model:
you just have to be distant from yourself.

The actor is a mime in this sense: he is a *port-parole.*
he represents (to us) the fact that we all are this kind of porte-paroles or mimes.

Theatre is not mimesis, but that which reveals mimesis.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Bye Bye Farewell (1983, 196)

1. *Introduction*

Like no other of Derrida's late contemporaries, the French philosopher, poet, translator, and literary critic, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe takes deconstruction and the concept of mimesis to the theatre.[37] As John Martis and John McKeane, among others, have shown, Lacoue-Labarthe's trajectory in French contemporary thought is deeply embedded in Derrida's deconstructive readings of philosophical and literary texts, and the idea of *écriture* more particularly. Few, however, emphasise the continuity between these two thinkers based on their interest in mimesis and the figure of the mime. This is in a way understandable given that Derrida did not write about the theatre and actors in the conventional sense. Similarly, as

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[37] "Passons au théâtre" is a recurring phrase in Lacoue-Labarthe's writing, and comes from Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1957, 65); see also Michel Deutsch, *Souvenirs épars: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, les années théâtre* (2018, 9).

Lacoue-Labarthe's theatrical collaborator at the National Theatre of Strasbourg (TNS), Michel Deutsch, points out, Lacoue-Labarthe was more a man *of* the theatre than a theatre theorist, formulating questions about mimesis from the point of view of the artist —the poet, the painter, the dramaturg, and in particular the actor (Kirkkopelto 2014a). According to Deutsch (echoing French philosopher Henri Gouhier), it was not uncommon for the "great French philosophers" to throw up the question of theatre every now and then. Often, however, in an illustrative way.[38] For Deutsch, Lacoue-Labarthe stands out in this tradition as "one of the rare contemporary French philosophers to have truly thought the theatre." (Deutsch 2018, 9) As we will see over the course of this chapter, it is also the question of philosophy that appeals to Lacoue-Labarthe because of its historical connection to myth and drama: the emergence of Western thinking is, since the Greeks, characterised by an inclination towards theatricality.

Professionally, Lacoue-Labarthe always resisted to be called a philosopher mainly because he found the distinction between philosophising and artistic practice to be an artificial one. This is particularly evident in the type of conversations he had with long-time collaborator and friend Jean-Luc Nancy, which often took the form of role-play. We get a glimpse of their playful interactions in the following passage from Nancy's *L'Allégorie* of 2006:

> What roles? In a sense, it doesn't matter. Quite clearly the protagonists were the Writer and the Philosopher. But it is important to underline this decisive feature: whilst it is obvious that I [Nancy] had to play the Philosopher, it is no less obvious that Philippe thought it important to wear the two masks in turn or superimposed on one another. (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 2006, 129; McKeane 2015, 15)

As regards the topic of mimesis, specifically, Lacoue-Lacoue found a certain degree of participation [*methexis*] important. He did not thematize the concept of participation to the extent that Nancy did, but one could say that he practiced it.[39] We can look at Lacoue-Labarthe's idea of writing as a practice by making a short detour via Plato. Among other things, Plato uses the model of participation to explain the relation between particulars and Platonic Forms.[40] Physical things share or participate in the world of Forms insofar as they are the shadows or adumbrations of the Forms. They receive their reality value and intelligibility from their lineage with the Forms. In addition to explaining an ontological relation between a transcendent Form and its physical materialisation, Plato also uses the idea of participation in pragmatic and practical terms. For example, being courageous in a situation of danger and moral difficulty is described by Plato as *partaking* in the Form Courage. Rather than imitating, the courageous man shares in that moment in all instances of acting in a courageous manner. Crucially for Plato, this involves not simply appearing courageous but genuinely enacting the affective, physical, intellectual aspects that constitute a courageous act. In this sense, partaking in a Platonic Form implies a degree of performativity in the sense of a mental, emotional and physical execution of specific characteristics or states of affairs. As Nancy put it in one of his last interviews (within the context of the *Homo Mimeticus Project*): "[For Plato], if I want to imitate Hercules or Dionysus, I cannot just reproduce their external form, I must also embrace internally the movement and passion that are at play." (Lawtoo 2020) Within this context, a performative act does not necessarily refer to a 'performance', in the traditional theatrical sense, but rather indicates the act of participating in an idea or figure while simultaneously bringing it into reality (in this case, courage).[41]

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[38] Deutsch quotes here from Gouhier's *Le Théâtre devant la pensée philosophique allemande*. Gouhier wrote extensively on the theatre and developed his own philosophy of theatre through the works of Nicolas Malebranche, René Descartes, Henri Bergson, Blaise Pascal, Antonin Artaud, among others, see *Le théâtre et l'existence* (1973), *L'essence du théâtre* (1968), *L'oeuvre théâtrale* (1958), and *Antonin Artaud et l'essence du theatre* (1974).

[39] For Nancy's elaborate description of *methexis* in relation to mimesis, see *L'image : mimesis et methexis* (2010), see also Giunta and Janus, *Nancy and Visual Culture* (2016).

[40] For Plato's connection between mimesis and participation, see Söffner, *Non-Representational Mimesis: Grönemeyer with Plato* (2010) and Van Riel, *Wijsbegeerte: een historische inleiding* (2011, 40–41).

Although Lacoue-Labarthe does not share in Plato's conviction that this form of mimetic participation presupposes knowledge of the Forms, he nevertheless uses Plato's pragmatic notion of mimesis as *methexis*. As we will see in what follows, Lacoue-Labarthe understands his own philosophical undertaking in this specific sense: as partaking in the problem of mimesis rather than reflecting on it from an external, what he would call, the "philosopher's" point of view. Lacoue-Labarthe inhabits the roles of philosopher, poet, and translator simultaneously when he writes about, for example, how German speculative-dialectical thinking aims to appropriate the 'superiority' of the Greeks by imitating their ideal of rationality. By playing with the roles of the poet and the philosopher in these texts, Lacoue-Labarthe wants to reveal the scenic or performative function of mimesis in both German Romanticism and his own literary/philosophical writing. This is but one of the ways in which he aims to display the relationship between theatricality (which Lacoue-Labarthe uses interchangeably with the notion of the 'poetical'), mimesis and philosophy. Thus, he is interested in the notion of mimesis insofar as it opens a realm of reflection where theorising is not self-enclosed and objectifying but rather is proposed as a practice that acknowledges its own mimetic undercurrents.

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[41] I am not suggesting that Plato's theory of Forms, or his metaphysics more generally, is reducible to language, and can hence be (exhaustively) explained by language theory. My aim is merely to point out that there are performative elements at play, in the Austinian sense, in the way Plato explains the moral life of the city's citizens. This follows from the fact that in Plato methexis and mimesis are usually intertwined. For Austin's speech-act theory, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1989). Regarding the relationship between performativity and performance, Elin Diamond provides an insightful collection of essays at the intersection of performance, performativity and cultural politics in *Performance and Cultural Politics* (2013). In theatre studies and transformative aesthetics, Erika Fischer-Lichte's historical account of performativity and (theatrical) performance as transformation is paradigmatic. Fischer-Lichte argues that the growing influence of the linguistic concept of performativity on theatre practitioners after the performative turn of the 1960s coincides with the shift from theatre as a cultural place for visual representation to (theatrical) performance as an "art event," see Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008).

There is yet another reason why Lacoue-Labarthe felt uncomfortable with the philosopher's title. Like many of his contemporaries, he was wary of intellectual influence and the idea that his thought could be explained through its lineage with his peers and their predecessors. Both Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe explicitly urge their readers to resist the temptation to make genealogical connections between their work. Nontheless, one can hardly deny that there is at least some degree of overlap between the "three musketeers" of deconstruction, as Derrida once jokingly called them (Derrida 2014, 87). Indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe scholars such as John McKeane (2015), John Martis (2005) and André Hirt (2009), write about the omnipresence of the concept of mimesis in Lacoue-Labarthe's work and stress, especially McKeane, the importance of the historical context in which Lacoue-Labarthe developed his ideas around this topic and integrate Derrida in his intellectual journey. Another example that illustrates the intricate bond between Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe is Martis's expansive account of the 'subject' in terms of "Subject-in-loss," in which he captures the complex foundation of the subject of mimesis as conceptualised by Lacoue-Labarthe with a clear Derridean trace (Martis 2005, 193–227). However, neither Martis nor McKeane explicitly address the connection between Derrida's deconstructive account of Mallarmé's mime and Lacoue-Labarthe's interest and work in the theatre, especially in relation to his insights on mimesis and philosophy. In my view, they seem to miss the ontological implications of what I consider to be Lacoue-Labarthe's main concern respecting the topic at hand, namely, to understand the theatricality of mimesis or, differently put, to unravel the paradoxes of mimesis through the subject as an actor or mime. It is also on these grounds that we must consider Lacoue-Labarthe's approach to philosophical as well as poetical writing: not as a manifestation of mimesis but as "that which reveals mimesis." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1983, 196; 1989, 117)

On the other end of the spectrum we have Timothy Murray's essay collection, *Mimesis, Masochism & Mime* (1997), which does acknowledge the importance of theatricality in Lacoue-Labarthe's work by framing him within a recurring French contemporary interest in the mime, alongside essays from Luce Irigaray, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Josette Féral, among others. Additionally, André Hirt's very informed study shows how, for Lacoue-Labarthe, writing literature and poetry is a form of thinking that is not opposed to philosophy but makes the question of philosophy possible. In this context, Hirt emphasises the idea of the theatre of thought as the precondition of all philosophical and literary attempts, whether it materialises in theory, poetry, or theatrical scene. Still, it is surprising that few, Esa Kirkkopelto (2014b; 2010) is the only one to my knowledge, address Derrida's influence on Lacoue-Labarthe's revision of the concept of mimesis through his account of the theatre actor. It is true that Lacoue-Labarthe did not structurally and systematically write about the mime figure, in fact, apart from a one or two passages, the word 'mime' is nowhere explicitly defined and explained in his texts. Mime in terms of the actor's *doing* however, is a recurring problematic and functions as a conceptual marker in Lacoue-Labarthe's reflections on mimesis. Reminiscing about his time at the TNS, in an interview with Jane Hiddleston in 2003, he says:

> More recently, but in less agreeable conditions, I worked on Sophocles' and Hölderlin's *Oedipus*. And I had a few other experiences of theatre along the way. It was when I was confronted all of a sudden with the work of an actor, of which I had only ever seen the result, that I thought to myself: "so it is first and foremost here that it all happens.[42] (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003b, 62)

Not only does Lacoue-Labarthe feel the urge to rethink the ancient subject of mimesis, but most importantly, he turns to the theatre and the actor's everyday practice to highlight what, in his view, had remained concealed in philosophically dominant views on the concept. What specifically catches the reader's eye is that there is a returning phrase in Nancy's notes, written after the death of Lacoue-Labarthe, which irrevocably places a Derridean signature at the heart of Lacoue-Labarthe's thoughts on the theatrical dimension of mimesis, namely the idea of the mime that imitates "nothing."[43]

Lacoue-Labarthe's claim that all mimetic acts are structures of "imitation without a model" [*mimer sans modèle*] or "mime of nothing" [*mime de rien*] is a direct reference to Derrida's account of the mime in "The Double Session." It is a reworking of "mine de rien," translated by Barbara Johnson as "a mine full of nothing" as well as the everyday meaning of "never min(e)d" (Derrida 1981a, 216). Derrida's procedure of mining the (Platonic) "cave of thought" only to find a metaphysical nothingness at the root or, rather, a multiplicity of roots, is the conceptual background for Lacoue-Labarthe's investigation of the theatrical conditions of mimesis, in general, and the ability of the mime to exhibit and potentially disturb what he calls a restricted form of mimesis, more specifically, which we will further explore over the course of this chapter. Lacoue-Labarthe also picks up on the significance of Derrida's wordplay: the French expression of "mine de rien" designates a subject that one can easily disregard because it is unimportant. The problematic of the mime is in other words a nothing because it is not worth our consideration. It is a minor topic, so to speak, not serious enough to be called proper philosophy.

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[42] Derrida was present at one of his and Deutsch's productions at the TNS. In 1978 Lacoue-Labarthe and Deutsch staged Lacoue-Labarthe's French translation of Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles's *Antigone*. The production took place in what Deutsch describes as "a ruined arsenal dating from the First Empire." For Derrida, the theatre event (it really was more of an event than a regular theatre performance) perfectly captured the "vertige" and "césure" of presence in the audience. Spectators were placed before a well in the arsenal, which had been hidden from them until the curtain fell. When the spectators were suddenly confronted with the abyss in front of them, they were "seized by dizziness" (Deutsch 2018, 108). In "The Double Session," Derrida also uses the notions of vertigo and caesura to characterize the mime in Mallarmé. Arguably, Derrida refers here to the ambiguous status of Mallarmé's 'text' rather than the performance described by Mallarmé.

[43] Nicolas Murena's doctoral thesis entitled "Le 'mime de rien' de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe : phrase, théâtre, philosophie," which he defended in 2019 at the University of Lyon, investigates the importance of the notions of the mime and of nothing in Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of mimesis. See http://www.ens-lyon.fr/evenement/recherche/le-mime-de-rien-de-philippe-lacoue-labarthe-phrase-theatre-philosophie

According to Nancy, the notion of "mime de rien" is Lacoue-Labarthe's "main philosophical exercise" (Nancy and Girard 2015, 40–41). It brings together three important aspects of Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy of the mime, around which this chapter is structured. Firstly, Lacoue-Labarthe maintains that the only thing that the human subject can imitate is nothing because the very structure of mimesis underlying the act of imitation is malleable and hence constantly differs from itself. This insight is based on the idea that there is always something in the act of repetition or imitation that escapes representation. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, it is the notion of pure malleability or plasticity around which all representational content gravitates. In this light, the notion of mimesis as imitating nothing is connected to the idea of metamorphosis. Recent work by Nidesh Lawtoo and Jane Bennett shows how one can understand the notion of mimesis in terms of plasticity.[44] The concept of plasticity or malleability opens the idea that a repetition of the same always implicates a mobilization of nature's innate capacity for metamorphosis and differentiation. Rather than assuming mimicry or imitation as adhering to the imperative of duplicating a stable reality, the mime is considered a figure who can and will imitate but only in so far as its own status remains ever-changing and groundless throughout the act. This hypothesis will be discussed in the first part of this chapter. Special attention will be given to Lacoue-Labarthe's division between, on the one hand, *restricted* mimesis, which roughly speaking indicates a (dominant) Platonic understanding of imitation and, on the other hand, *general* mimesis, which Lacoue-Labarthe associates with the theatrical or dramatic conditions of mimesis. This condition entails that every repetitive act always also produces irreducible effects of irrepresentability.

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[44] For a recent, in-depth discussion about Lacoue-Labarthe and the relationship between mimesis and plasticity see N. Lawtoo, "The Plasticity of Mimesis" (2017b) and J. Bennett, "Mimesis: Paradox or Encounter" (2017). Consider in this context also Catharine Malabou's description of the two-fold function of plasticity: that which "receives" and that which "gives" form, in *What should we do with our brain?* (2008).

Secondly, the notion of "mime de rien" highlights the hypothesis that the mime figure functions as a surface phenomenon of nature's myriad ways of differentiating, which is in se an impersonal structure of reality. Instead of foregrounding the appropriating function of imitation, in the sense of a deliberate, voluntary act in which one, for example, forms one's identity based on ad hoc imitations of others through assimilation, Lacoue-Labarthe examines the phenomenon of the mime becoming a human toy of nature's mimetic tendencies while maintaining a paradoxical agency over that activity. In the second part of this chapter, I will investigate this proposition in relation to the actor's practice specifically. The vocal point of my analysis is Lacoue-Labarthe's special notion of nature: he refers to the Greek *physis*, more specifically, Aristotle's conception of *physis* in *Physics* on which Aristotle's definition of mimesis is based. Lacoue-Labarthe traces yet again a restricted and general dimension of mimesis in Aristotle, which will be his conceptual guide in accounting for the actor or mime.

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that there is always a sense of involuntary or 'passive' mimesis at play in the ways in which we write (i.e., replicate) history, philosophise, and position ourselves in everyday situations. Theatrical performance, one might argue with figures such as Plato, St. Augustine, and Rousseau, is the amplification of this passive form of mimesis: we are at the mercy of the dramatic powers of language, body, and gesture to the point of being entirely hypnotised and paralysed. More importantly, within this Platonic tradition, it is generally argued that the collective experience of performance disables us to make true judgements about moral values. Lacoue-Labarthe shares with these thinkers a certain resilience towards the "hysterical," and he fully underscores their analogy between the theatrical scene and the political scene in that respect.[45] At the same time, he cannot fully accept their conclusions, which usually move in the direction of a plea for censorship and the gesture of doing away with the theatre altogether. Rather than accepting a dominant definition of theatre as a hysterical spectacle (this notion of theatre runs all the way through the German Romantics, which Lacoue-Labarthe worked on extensively), Lacoue-Labarthe will challenge an exclusively passive account of drama by putting the figure of the dramatic actor, the mime, under a magnifying glass. The mime and the act of miming are used by Lacoue-Labarthe as a counter-concept to invest in manifestations of theatre that disrupt a theatre of passivity. Through

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[45] The political implications of a so-called passive account of mimesis, where (collective) imitation is used to disseminate immoral, violent, and exclusionary political ideas about humanity and society is a major theme in Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy. However, since it is not the central focus of this study, I will not go into detail about this aspect of his philosophy. Most important in this respect is his work with Nancy about Germany and Nazism in *The Nazi Myth* (1990). For secondary literature, see for example N. Lawoo, "Poetics and Politics (with Lacoue-Labarthe): Introduction" (2017a) and *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019); E. M. Vogt, "The "Useless Residue of the Western Idea of Art": Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe Concerning Art "AfterAuschwitz" (2016).

Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Diderot's famous *Paradox sur le comédien* (1830), in "Diderot, paradoxe et le mimèsis" (1986b), it will become clear why, for Lacoue-Labarthe, mimesis's passive and productive forces are paradoxically entwined.

Finally, the notion of *mime de rien* is used by Lacoue-Labarthe to discuss the distancing or "sobering" function of the mime. The final part of this chapter will return to the epigraph of this chapter: "It is wholly possible to mime without a model: you just have to be distant from yourself." One way of interpreting this insight is by making a comparison between the mime and the speaking actor. One might say that what distinguishes the mime from the regular actor is that the former lacks speech. The mime can convey characters, emotions, and situations merely by physical and facial evocation, without necessarily acting out a pregiven, written script, channelling yet again Derrida's mime as well as the ancient *mimos*. What Lacoue-Labarthe specifically wants to direct our attention to is the fact that when we categorise mime in terms of "lacking" language, we silently have assumed a speaking subject as the norm. In other words, when we think of the theatre actor, we often take the speaking subject as the paradigm for theatrical expression tout court. In light of this assumption, the mime is considered an amputated figure. "Being mute" is understood as "lacking": what was initially there has been taken away. The reason why we make this comparison is because Lacoue-Labarthe will *inverse* this paradigm (mime is the essence of all acting) and will argue on the basis of this that the mime is constituted in terms of *difference* as regards its appeal to *logos*.

In addition to Lacoue-Labarthe's essays on mimesis in *L'Imitation des modernes (Typographies II)* (1986b), I will make use in my analysis of the works in which Lacoue-Labarthe's methodological link between philosophy, poetry, literature and theatre becomes more explicit: *Bye Bye Farewell* (1983), *La fiction du biographique* (2007a), *Scène* (with Nancy) (2013), *Phrase* (2018), Jean-Christophe Bailly's *La vérériction* (2011), among others. I was also in the privileged position to work on Lacoue-Labarthe's yet unpublished collection of texts, testimonials, and interviews about theatre, entitled "Au théâtre," collected and edited by Aristide Bianchi and Leonid Kharlamov. It is in these less straightforwardly philosophical texts where we see Lacoue-Labarthe's mimetic method at work.

2. Plato & Theatrical Mimesis

In "Typography" Lacoue-Labarthe rather surprisingly describes mimesis in terms of a "disquieting *plasticity*" (1989, 115). This claim is central to Lacoue-Labarthe's exploration of the theatrical dimension of mimesis and has to be thought against the background of his deconstructive analysis of mainly Plato's but also Aristotle's original meditations on the concept of mimesis. Lacoue-Labarthe divides their conceptions under two headings: the first is a 'restrictive' mimesis, which has received much attention throughout history. The second is a generally underexposed 'general' mimesis.[46] In what follows I will explain these two modes of mimesis in Plato, which will anticipate our discussion of Aristotle in relation to Diderot in the second part of this chapter. Then I will examine in which sense, for Lacoue-Labarthe, 'general' or 'plastic' mimesis forms the basis for his conception of theatrical mimesis.

2.1 General & Restrictive Mimesis

Lacoue-Labarthe's first account of restrictive mimesis in Plato concerns visual representation and deals with the question of epistemology and metaphysics. As the classical scholar Vernant has argued, Plato was the first in the Greek tradition to consider poetry and the visual arts (although the concept of art was yet to be established) in terms of reproductions of real objects. Plato was also the first to suggest that reproductions could be assessed autonomously from what they depict. This was a major departure from Greek culture at the time, which generally viewed statues of the gods, for example, as an immediate expression of divine revelation, rather than as secondary chimeras (Vernant 1991, 180). Plato characterises all ocular forms of imitation (pictures, mirrors, shadows, dreams, etc.) as *semblances*: "they are grouped together in their difference from, but resemblance to, real objects." (Vernant 1991, 166) Ideally, in Plato's view, those responsible for making or distributing "imitations of images" should not be allowed in the city-state because they are concerned with reproductions of reality rather than with reality itself (Plato 2013b, 412–13; 600e-601a). In the larger context of society, Plato assesses artworks as luxurious, frivolous and deceitful, and would distract citizens in their quest for true knowledge. This restrictive form of mimesis is based on a hierarchical model of original and copy, where the copy is exclusively understood in its degraded relation to the original.

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Plato's ontological argument against replica's in, mainly, *Republic* book 10 is a logical result — if not a mere afterthought — of his position on dramatic mimesis in *Republic* Book 2 and 3 (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003a, 59). Although tragedy is discussed in Book 10, it is in particular and almost exclusively in the earlier books of the *Republic* where

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[46] Lacoue-Labarthe's distinction between restricted and general mimesis is reminiscent of Derrida's distinction between restricted and general economy, which he discusses in his essay on Georges Bataille, see "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," in *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 1978a).

Plato, or Socrates rather, is so hostile towards drama and the tragic poet. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Socrates's dismissive tone regarding dramatic mimesis points to two main things, which bypass metaphysical and epistemological concerns. First, Socrates's rejection of poetry and tragedy must be understood against the background of its live, oral performance, and not the written form. As mentioned in the introduction, scholars such as Vernant, Puchner and Burnyeat have argued that for contemporary readers Plato's resistance against poetry is only conceivable when we judge it against its educational and formative role in society.

In the same vein, Havelock focuses on the centrality of Plato's distinction between diegetic and mimetic speech, which is paradigmatic in Lacoue-Labarthe's further development of the distinction between restricted and general mimesis. Havelock localizes Plato's educational concern with the transmission of knowledge via mimetic performance in the actor. The problem with mimetic (as opposed to narrative) performance is first and foremost the practice of making the audience, vicariously, feel emotions that would make them weak as regards their overall constitution. The better the performance the more the people in the audience would feel it was about *them*, rather than about a random historical or fictional figure they may or may not have known. The tragic actor is most dangerous because he (and it could indeed only be a "he" as all the parts were played by men) masters the craft of activating people's emotional inclinations and particularly those that disable rational thought. Lacoue-Labarthe considers Plato's account of the dramatic function of mimesis — the identificatory bond between performer and spectator based on pathos — as *passive* mimesis.[47]

Socrates is concerned about the effects of dramatic portrayal on the human psyche and body. By a simple gesture or with a subtle changing of pitch, the actor could, without restriction and reflection, bring situations and actions to life through mere evocation. Additionally, actors could simulate *how* people experienced war, death, adultery, vengeance, etc. This heightened the level of identification in the audience. Furthermore, Socrates forbids men from engaging in tragedies because it would make them weep for the sons they lost in battle (which applied to nearly all men in the audience). Plato also links loss of control, organic weakness and excessive emotion to the realm of the feminine (Plato 2013b, 432–33; 10.605d-e). Instead of demonstrating [*démontre*] that a moral dilemma could be solved through reason — a form of mimesis Plato would allow (Plato 2013b, 426–29; 604b-e) — the tragic poet merely exhibits [*montre*] the emotional complexities of the dilemma without any moral resolution (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003a, 59). Put differently, what worries Socrates is that actors could portray anything without there being any practical or ethical knowledge involved (Plato 2013b, 416–19; 602a-c).[48] In sum, the first point focuses on the theatre's violation of the primacy of reason.

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[47] Rousseau's famous anti-theatrical position is Platonic in this sense because it is based on an account of theatre as a cultural institution that mobilises spectators to unreflectively absorb and reproduce what they see represented on stage. Rousseau is an important figure for Lacoue-Labarthe. In *Poetics of History: Rousseau and the Theater of Originary Mimesis* (2019a), Lacoue-Labarthe discovers a transcendental thinking of origins in Rousseau, based on a dialectic of theatricality and anti-theatricality. This insight will be the matrix in Lacoue-Labarthe's thoughts on the history of philosophy, namely as based on the idea of mimetic ambiguity.

The second point is closely linked to the previous one in that it captures the relationship between mimetic participation and the idea of weakness and passivity. Unexpectedly, Socrates does not distinguish between the roles of performer and spectator when it comes to the emotional and "deleterious moral effect" of performance on the human soul (Hall 2010a, 148). The re-enactment of Klytymnestra's lament over her daughter's death, Iphigeneia, installs a model of excessive emotion in the actor and the spectator in equal measure. In fact, all participants in tragedy, from the tragic actor portraying Klytymnestra to the person in charge of the props to the members of the chorus, they are all affected by her grief and will carry the traces of that emotional event with them.

Lacoue-Labarthe argues that we must view Socrates's emphasis on the affective, contaminating power of theatrical mimesis in light of Socrates's concern with the formation of the human soul, which he discusses in *Republic* Book 2. I will not go into detail about Plato's complex account of the soul. For our understanding of Lacoue-Labarthe's 'general' definition of mimesis, it suffices to point at Plato's focus on the malleability of the human soul and mind. Lacoue-Labarthe is fascinated by the fact that Plato, when discussing the education of young children — whose souls are the most "wax-like" of all — is remarkably mild in his view of the use of mimesis in storytelling. Because of children's natural inclination to learn things through mimicking and repetition, Socrates sees an enormous potential in using mimesis for the modelling of the young. He applauds the use of mimesis by caregivers and the city's guardians, as it allows them to "stamp" good models on children's souls through mimetic play (Plato 2013a, 192–93; 377a). Through repetition, imitation, and habituation, children unconsciously or unreflectively acquire the (practical) knowledge necessary to be a good citizen. Being a good citizen has to be understood in moral terms but also carries an ontological weight: being good entails having a "proper", stable, internally harmonious, identity. Socrates proposes that children are gradually taught an identity through habit formation in which the imitation of good models plays a central role (albeit under strict conditions of censorship). At some point, that identity is well-formed and fixed, which means that each individual will automatically act according to its proper role in society's internal organisation, which is ideally, governed by reason. For Lacoue-Labarthe, what is pivotal in Socrates's argumentation is the insight that the idea of the plasticity of the human soul functions as Socrates's condition for the 'making' of citizens. Echoing Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe will assess this in terms of a natural plasticity being "inscribed" in a "mimetological" "program" or "machine". We will later develop these terms in more detail. We can conclude for now by saying that Socrates aims for complete control of citizens in terms of installing fixed properties that are carefully screened by the city's educators. In sum, the second point focuses on the moral and educational aspects of mimetic play in connection to the ideal of identity.

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[48] Plato's objection against the lack of knowledge during poetic reciting is further discussed in Socrates's short dialogue with the rhapsode Ion, who was a frequent participant of the popular Homeric recitals, see Plato, *Ion* (2006).

These two complicated yet subtle Platonic approaches to performative mimesis illustrate the implicit power of what Lacoue-Labarthe calls 'general' mimesis or, in more sophisticated terms, "fundamental mimetology". Neither of the conceptions of mimesis in Plato I just briefly sketched out are new, most scholars acknowledge Plato's shifting stance on the concept of poetry and the mimetic arts throughout the *Republic* and other works such as the *Sophist* and *Laws*. Lacoue-Labarthe's motivation behind discussing Plato's ambiguous stance on mimesis is however quite specific. Often, commentators explain Plato's rejection of tragic actors in Republic Book 10 on the basis of a 'restricted' definition of mimesis, which refers to the bad influence of artistic representation or, in theatrical terms, the 'spectacle'. As a result, the mimetic actor is discussed in the context of a staged event that is considered as an essentially specular phenomenon. Theatre — the staging of fictional characters, the Greek gods, historical events, animals, dreams, the elements, tales — is an expression of visual representation or, more generally, representational art. Theatrical performance is understood as yet another form of a visual duplication of what is already present in reality, in a similar way as paintings, sculptures and dreams are secondary (and, according to Plato, degraded) reflections of the world. One only has to think of the expansive scholarship on Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the issue of mimetic 'shadowing' is largely explained through the metaphor of optical illusion. Now, Lacoue-Labarthe is not saying that theatre lacks such visual dimensions but rather that Plato's rejection of theatricality is rooted in another problematic.[49] Integrating poetry and the broad array of performing arts (dithyramb, pantomime,[50] dramatic sketches, satyr play, rhapsody, storytelling, singing, dancing) into a restrictive account of mimesis passes over Plato's fundamental issue regarding the malleability and hybridity of human identity, which informs all of Socrates's views on the subject of mimesis, even his later rejection of the visual arts.

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[49] Samuel Weber has pointed at alternative understandings of theatricality and drama since the Greeks, which depart from a representational account of theatre. Instead, Weber focuses on theatricality as a medium to amplify the ambivalences about place and identity, see S. Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (2004).

[50] On the cultural importance of pantomime in Ancient Greek society, see E. Hall and R. Wyles, *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime* (2011).

2.2 To Act is to Mime: Fundamental Mimetology

Lacoue-Labarthe detects a paradox in Plato's writing of which Plato himself was probably well aware. When Socrates discusses the instalment of models into the passive, plastic souls of children he makes sure to emphasise the nature of the models as they leave an unchangeable and irreversible stamp on children.

> You know that the beginning of everything we undertake is most important, especially in any young tender creature? That is when it is most malleable and when whatever character you desire to be stamped on the individual is fixed." (Plato 2013a, 192–93; 377a)

This passage describes our previous mention of the passive nature of the mimetic act. The idea of parents reading bedtime stories to their children and in so doing teaching them about the good and evil in the world is of course a textbook example of how we implicitly sensitise and mould children's morality. The passive nature of this exchange is not hard to understand, after all, children are depending on their parents for their orientation in the world. Moreover, because of the fun element of the parent's engaged reading, evoking the child's imagination by using a myriad of voices and gestures, it literally undergoes a world alien to them but with which they learn to identify.

The crux of Lacoue-Labarthe's critique on Plato is that he rejects the presumption that the repetition of this kind of educational mimesis will ultimately lead to a stable and fixed identity. Plato's idea is that the plasticity of the children's souls will ultimately be shaped into a final form. This entails that the internally unified and harmonious character of those souls provides sufficient stability necessary to lead an adult life dedicated to one specific task. This suggests that by the time citizens are grown up and found their proper discipline or specialisation in life, they should be immune to any outside and potentially toxic influence. They would know that — and how — *logos* should always rule over *thymos* and *eros* in any given situation. Moreover, they would have no difficulty in detecting the untrue and morally detestable characteristics of the gods as they are portrayed in Homer's verses; moreover, they would have appropriated the means to distance themselves from these morally toxic practices. However, as we learn from Socrates's critical notes on Homer and the tragedians, this is not at all the case:

> You see the best of us, I imagine, listen to Homer and any of the other tragic poets representing the grief of one of the heroes as they pour forth a long speech in their lamentation, even singing and beating their breasts, and, you know, we enjoy it, we surrender ourselves to it and suffer along with the characters as we follow and eagerly applaud whoever thus affects us in this way the most as a good poet. (Plato 2013b, 432–3310.605c-d)

"The best of us" are as apt to be transformed by what they see and hear as young children are. Reason and habit formation will not provide them with adequate protection against the temptations to which they are exposed in the theatre. It seems thus as if Plato is contradicting himself here as he clearly acknowledges that people remain plastic creatures well into their adulthood. On this point, Lacoue-Labarthe radicalises what he considers to be Socrates's own intuition: mimesis is of all ages and cannot be suppressed, secured and / or appropriated by a transcendent institution or model that, from a view from nowhere, as Thomas Nagel would put it, can decide about its own authority, and hijack the human condition for its own purposes.

The crux of the matter is that this is not so much a contradiction as a paradox, says Lacoue-Labarthe. We must look more closely at the function of the educators and the guardians in Plato's writing to properly understand what Lacoue-Labarthe has in mind. The guardians are crucial in Socrates's conception of the organisation of the ideal city. Together with the philosopher rulers, they supervise the use of mimesis and they decide on the appropriate models to live by. Crucially though the guardians are not 'God-given', but they are taught by means of music, poetry and stories as well (Plato 2013a, 190–95; 376d-377c). We must not overlook the importance of this insight, says Lacoue-Labarthe. It means that Plato purposefully included the unstable nature of mimesis into the city-state's "program". Although the success of a well-organised city-state is grounded in the presentation of only 'good' models, their aimed effect depends on how well mimesis is performed by those who know how to use it. If we follow this line of reasoning, we could conclude that the ultimate guardians of the city must be the best actors as they are particularly apt to teach people about what is just and unjust in the most effective way. This includes storytelling in the form of simple narration accompanied by musical, poetic and rhythmic mimesis and repetition. If one wants to take the argument even further, since the guardians are the most formidable people in society, it is the figure of the actor who provides the blueprint, the ultimate model of citizenship *tout court*. Hence the paradox in Plato: the best actor is the best educator, and yet the first educational lesson is that actors are to be expelled from the city.

For Lacoue-Labarthe, this paradox illustrates the disquieting nature of a "fundamental" mimesis underlying all of Socrates's objections against imitation. As Edith Hall notes, "Plato's attack on the theatre was a function, of course, of his appreciation of its power." (2010b, 23) We have come to Lacoue-Labarthe's main insight with respect to his notion of general mimesis or fundamental mimetology. The notion that the actor could be a teacher and impostor in one is based on the expertise of *mimesthai* (originally belonging to the sphere of *mousiké)*, which means 'to enact', 'to portray', or even more accurately 'to act like'. The concepts of character and fiction, which we would normally link with theatrical mimesis, are not part of the early usage of the term, which generally reflects only the most basic quality of "acting in a similar manner as" (Ortega Máñez 2017, 109). As mentioned, the verb *mimesthai* is derivative of the noun *mîmos*, 'mime' or 'actor'. The verb 'to mime' is not reduced to literal illustration or demonstration but captures the more general realm of the performer's *evocation* of traits that come from 'elsewhere' and that are recognised by the audience as such.[51]

On the basis of this notion of *mimesthai*, Lacoue-Labarthe will intervene in Plato's writing. He shifts the terminology from the actor and dramatic acting to the mime and miming in order to foreground the plastic nature of the theatre performer. In "Typography", Lacoue-Labarthe explains his notion of plasticity:

> Not only the undifferentiation and endless doubling which threaten the social body as a whole, but, on an underlying level and actually provoking them, *mimetism* itself, that pure and disquieting *plasticity* which potentially authorizes the varying appropriation of all characters and all functions (all the roles), that kind of "typical virtuosity" which doubtless requires a "subjective" base – a "wax" – but without any other property than an infinite malleability: *instability* "itself". (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 115)

For Lacoue-Labarthe, *mimetism* is not acting out, transforming into, or replicating something or someone that is preconceived. It is a mere entering into the realm of possibility or potentiality, a hovering between 'no one', 'no thing' and 'no function' in particular. Mimetism is not covering up an identity, or superimposing a character on an identity, or misleading people by assuming another identity. Mimetic play may lead to one of those things, but it cannot be reduced to either of those forms. Lacoue-Labarthe describes it as the production of a life inhabited by 'no-one's': "Thus the mimetic life is made up of *scenes from the life of one who is suited for nothing* – or a Jack-of-all-trades." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 129). With the notion of the mime, Lacoue-Labarthe hence wants to show how Plato's ideal of identity, which grounds all duplicating acts, loses all value and relevance.

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[51] For example, in relation to the use of *mimesthai* in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, which describes the performance of the Delian maidens, Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi proposes an alternative to the usual 'mimicking'. She argues, instead, that *mimesthai* entails the "evocation of the essence of an entity but not necessarily exact reproduction of its formal details." (Peponi 2009, 39)

2.3 Purifying Mimesis

For Lacoue-Labarthe, it is important to emphasise the irony that Socrates lays bare in his argumentation.[52] It is in that space of irony that Lacoue-Labarthe identifies the necessarily twofold character of mimesis. On the one hand, the restricted form, which covers the visual appearance of a figure or character. This includes Socrates's description of 'actively' shaping 'passive' human material into a preconceived figure. On the other hand, the production of nothing but pure alteration. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, it is only through setting up a theatre situation where these 'doubling' modes become apparent that the essential nature of identity as well as mimesis can be "verified" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 116).[53] This implies, for Lacoue-Labarthe, that overcoming Plato's essentialist conception of mimesis has to necessarily pass through Plato, since the fundamental elements of a plastic mimesis (the precondition of all mimeses, mimetologies and identities), are inscribed in Plato's writing.

In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, Plato, or Socrates rather, was conscious of — in the sense that he feared — the material fragility of human identity. One of Socrates's core objections against mimetic activity is directed precisely at the impropriety of the actor's nonbeing. Socrates argues that the performer is a threat to society on the grounds of its 'non-identity', someone without qualities of its own and who never fully commits to anything, whether it is the ideal of the superiority of reason, a prescribed set of morals or an identifiable social function or discipline. On the grounds that a person can only be good in one thing in life — Socrates's "'one man – one job' principle," as Burnyeat calls it (2012) — Socrates claims that the actor is ultimately good in nothing (Plato 2013a, 162–65; 2.369e-370c; 2013a, 256–57; 3.394e-395b). The mime is the ultimate exemplification of this idea: the aim of the mime is 'to mime' pure and simple, which designates a potential multiplicity of tasks and roles. It is the absence of and disinterest in obtaining and retaining properties that Socrates will also label as immoral and unjust (Plato 2013a, 132–33; 361a; Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 124). According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Socrates's resistance against ambiguity, impropriety and multiplicity expresses a deeply rooted anxiety that originates in the figure of Socrates but that can be found in many Neoplatonist versions of mimetic theory throughout the history of Western thought (Potolsky 2006, 116), even by thinkers who consider themselves anti-Platonic such as Heidegger, for example.[54] Lacoue-Labarthe links this fear with the possible implications of the ineradicable discrepancy between the visual or representational side of art, character or identity on the one hand, and the productive force behind it, on the other, which is an impersonal source that remains nameless, unauthorised and indifferent to being in term of identity.

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[52] For Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's account of irony in relation to the literature of German Romanticism, see J-L. Nancy and Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'absolu littéraire: théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemande* (1978); with respect to Friedrich Schlegel, in particular, see also K. Newmark, *L'absolu littéraire: Friedrich Schlegel and the Myth of Irony* (1992).

[53] Esa Kirkkopelto conceptualises the deconstructed theatre in terms of "the structure of the scenic encounter" (2010).

This discrepancy appears, for example, in what Plato coined as the quarrel between philosophy and poetry. In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, setting up theory against poetry, making a hate-object out of theatre and its producers, is a recurring Western trope. Better yet, Lacoue-Labarthe maintains, like many of his contemporaries, that this quarrelling dialogue constitutes the birth and configuration of Western civilization as we know it today. The hostility and fear against theatrical mimesis circles around two main issues: the replacement of 'being' and 'presence', on the one hand, and the seduction of the actor, on the other:

> Theory versus theatre: the good vision versus the bad. And since then, the gesture has not ceased to be repeated: in Christian thought, massively, but also in Rousseau, the founder of modern politics, and up to the most recent condemnations of the spectacular-market society. What is targeted in such a condemnation is what the Greeks called mimesis: imitation, reproduction, semblance or change, simulation, copying, in short, everything that is of the order of re-presentation, that is to say, that replaces the real, original and original presence. Paradigm: the actor who is not the one he plays. And if the condemnation is so violent, it is not only because representation is the degradation of presence, but also, and above all, because it is seductive. (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 98; my translation)

The philosopher's reaction is purification: as long as we purify thought, society and character from the toxic effects of imitation, we can maintain our core identity. In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, however, this discourse rests on mimetic or mythic foundations: "All these attempts to reduce the improper, these attempts at cleaning, at 'purification', are part of a great machinery of identification which is entirely founded upon imitation itself." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003a, 58) In very simple (if not simplistic) words, this is Lacoue-Labarthe's argument. Purified thought exists only in its opposition to what it must be purified from. Representation is necessary to make this opposition visible. Visibility in turn enables one to let the theatre of purification take place. At the end of this theatrical process, through identification with what has been represented, of setting up reason or theory against what violates it (culminating in the 'plot' of the ideal state in Plato's case), one finds oneself a purified, purged subject. And since this operation is the very paradigm of *tragedy* (in the Aristotelean sense) with its promise of catharsis, Lacoue-Labarthe continues, theory and poetry necessarily function according to the same logic, that is they operate on the same plane. They might be represented by us, philosophers, as different, but they work with the same theatrical scheme (Kirkkopelto 2014a, 127).[55] By consequence and referencing Bataille's anti-Hegelian account of sacrifice in this regard, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the project of purification is doomed to fail.[56] Tragedy lapses into comedy as the operation cannot dispel the evil represented without implying its logical necessity. It evokes a catharsis that is entirely simulated or mimed:

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[54] For Lacoue-Labarthe's extensive and complex work on Heidegger's philosophical and political discourse, see Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme experience* (1986a); J. Mckeane, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: (Un)Timely Meditations* (2005, 133–52); J. Martis, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Representation and the Loss of the Subject* (Martis 2005, 128–55); D. Kambouchner et at., Le retrait politique (1983) as well as two volumes that came out of Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's initiative to establish a Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, J-F. Lyotard and L. Ferry, *Rejouer le politique: travaux du centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* (1981).

> Tragedy would be no more, as Bataille remarked on sacrifice, than 'comedy,' catharsis that is feigned, acted out, simulated, *mimed* —borrowing its means from (and making the borrowing depend upon) the very thing it seeks to rid itself of. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 105)

Essentially, the point Lacoue-Labarthe wants to make is that, in either case, whether we consider the idea of purification in relation to theory or to tragedy, the paradigm used is the actor. It is the success of theatrical impersonation that engenders the quest for purification while providing the essential means with which that purgation can be accomplished. Hence the importance of turning to the actor. The figure of the actor exemplifies 1) being in charge of the level of deception and 2) being in charge of the level of pleasure and emotional release which devalues or covers over the actor's deceptive nature. I am speaking here in terms of levels because, as we will see, the craft of deception implicates working with degrees rather than natural or essential differences. As Lacoue-Labarthe pointed out in the passage quoted earlier, the actor's deception boils down to the replacement [*substituer*] of the models of 'being' and 'presence' for something else. In the following section, we will investigate how the mime's craft of substitution relates to the evocation of something fundamentally 'other', resisting reintegration into a program of self-identity.

3. *The Paradox of the Mime*

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[55] Aristotle's definition of catharsis in the *Poetics* is still a highly controversial topic. For an overview of the numerous approaches to Aristotle's concept of catharsis, see Appendix 5 in S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1986).
[56] See on this topic also G. Bataille, *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice* (1990).

In the previous section I have explained that Lacoue-Labarthe's idea of general mimesis refers to a "primary," "fundamental" mode that allows the mime to evoke models — figures, emotions, ideals, ideas — while keeping them in a permanent state of nonbeing. General mimesis designates the imperative to never transgress the realm of possibility and transformation; to resist identification. In what follows I will discuss the mime's instability more concretely from the perspective of the performer. My main objective is to explicate Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the paradox of the mime "being at once everything—and nothing" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 116). I will do so on the basis of Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Diderot's paradox of the actor and will make a short detour through Aristotle's notion of *poiesis* along the way.

3.1 The Mimetic Subject

I hope it is clear by now that Lacoue-Labarthe is not primarily interested in imitation in the classical sense of a conscious activity that involves a subject obtaining properties that it did not have before. Not only does imitation in terms of assimilation assume an essential distinction between subject and model, but it also suggests that the imitated model will be appropriated by the subject: the subject will function as the authorial foundation of that imitation, meaning that one can freely choose to stop and rid oneself of those properties whenever one pleases and 'return' to oneself again. Lacoue-Labarthe maintains however that there is no fixed, authentic self or soul that precedes imitation. There is no intimate core from which mimetic activities originate. It is the other way around, says Lacoue-Labarthe: that intimate core is produced by the failure of the subject's identification with a model.[57] Lacoue-Labarthe does hold on to the idea of the subject as a 'base' but only in paradoxical terms. Every imitation of a model will present and produce the self as a lack: "What is essential is the incarnation of a lack." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 115) The subject might be the base of models but only insofar as that base is without a base, i.e., unstable.

As we have discussed in the context of Lacoue-Labarthe's 'plastic' definition of the mime, the necessary condition for the imitation of models is the mime remaining a wax-like figure throughout the mimetic act. This idea becomes the paradigm for Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of the subject. In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, the subject can only be accounted for in mimetic, unstable terms because subjectivity is a result of our efforts to affirm ourselves in light of a particular understanding of the relation between 'subject' and 'modelling' or 'fictioning'. There would be no 'self' without its relation to its desire for 'fictioning'. And that relation, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, is by definition uncertain, it is sustained by an irreducible gap or schism which escapes any metaphysical preoccupation. The figure of the mime is 'located' (clearly not in spatial terms) 'in' this gap. Its expertise lies in becoming the surface for the interplay between the presentation of characters, emotions and functions, on the one hand, and the human figure as a 'no-one', on the other. Looking more closely at the performing aspect of this 'miming' of the subject will allow us to get a better grip on this interplay. The eighteenth-century French philosopher, Denis Diderot, is Lacoue-Labarthe's main source to explain how the actor's production of features and functions is linked to its own absence of properties. But before we enter into Diderot's *Paradox*, we have to shed light on an important Derridean trace in Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology as it directly informs his reading of Diderot.

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[57] For Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Lacan and his adjusted psychoanalytic model of identification, see J-L. Nancy and Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan* (1992).

3.2 Derrida's "Mimetological Machine"

According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Diderot's *The Paradox of the Actor* is paradigmatic for thinking about mimesis in terms of production or, in Aristotelean terms, *poiesis*. In an interview, he says: "Diderot did nothing less than rethink, comprehensively, and against a whole tradition that I have already evoked, that which makes theatrical performance possible." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2003b, 62) There are two important points to highlight in this passage. On the one hand, we learn that Diderot's treatise on the actor is based on a notion of theatrical mimesis that departs from a dominant line of thought in Western philosophy. On the other hand, Diderot is said to provide the means to think about the possible conditions of performing. The latter suggests a transcendental yet empiricist, practical investigation, which is, if we follow Lacoue-Labarthe's line of thinking, largely absent in the way mimesis and performance had been theorised up until Diderot.

Let us now turn to a footnote in Derrida's "The Double Session" for some necessary background. In this essay, Derrida elaborates on what role imitation had played in Western history and how Diderot inverses that "program":

> Nothing in the above-mentioned logical program was to change when, following Aristotle, and particularly during the 'age of classicism,' the models for imitation were to be found not simply in nature but in the works and writers of Antiquity that had known how to imitate nature. One could find a thousand examples up to the Romantics (including the Romantics and often those well after

> them). Diderot, who nevertheless so powerfully solicited the mimetological 'machine,' especially in *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*, confirms upon the analysis of what he calls the 'ideal imagined model' (supposedly non-Platonic) that all manner of reversals are included in the program. (Derrida 1981a, 190)

Derrida argues that Diderot, in the *Paradox*, at least initially, conforms to a recurring matrix of mimesis which he sees exemplified in the art of classicism.[58] Instead of imitating nature directly, artists working in the age of classicism imitate the Ancient Greek model of imitating nature, which is regulated by a set of ideal forms (harmony, perfection, form, proportion, clarity of structure). Artistic creation is understood in terms of imitating and perfecting nature through the filter of aesthetic models. Derrida points out that in classicism and neoclassicism, this results in a doubling of mimesis, for which he coins the term "mimetic program" or the previously discussed "mimetological machine": the artist imitates a model of imitation which bases its imitation of nature on an ideal model.[59] By letting his actor imitate an ideal model on stage [*le modèle idéal imaginé*], Diderot seems to be in line with that tradition. Diderot's actor imitates nature via a poetic model which is supposed to capture the 'essence' of the character.[60] In Derrida's view, however, Diderot seems to inverse the mimetological machine because the actor's model is posited as fictive, imaginary, like a spectre in the mind. In his *Salons* on art, Diderot also uses the term *modèle intérieure* (Roach 2011, 125–26). "They are the vain images of poetry. No, not even that. They are the phantoms fashioned from this or that poet's special fantasy." (Diderot and Archer 1957, 21) Derrida suggests that Diderot's "phantom" disrupts the traditional program of mimesis as he does not take the ideal model to be a pregiven, stable entity, like a Platonic Idea, but a ghost-like figure without substance.[61] Put differently, what Diderot considers to be the ideal of imitation is not the ancient model of imitating an unmovable and eternal model of harmony, form, unification, etc., but a fantasy-image [*eidôlon*] instead.

What Derrida's deconstructive analysis ultimately wants to show is that the economy of mimesis in (neo)classicism in fact works exactly like Diderot's "logic of substitution" which gravitates around the fantasy-image: on the basis of imitation, classicism paintings *substitute* the ideal model of the ancients, which is really just a myth or a fantasy, and thereby introduce a difference that "allows for infinite reversals" between model and copy.[62] By consequence, the function of the artwork is reduced to its contribution to a machinery of repetition, which is merely there to sustain, performatively, mythological thinking.[63] Conversely, it is the myth of a pure, ahistorical model that is reduced to a meaningless repetition in the production of the artwork. Now, the reason we took a short detour through Derrida is because Lacoue-Labarthe's essay on Diderot's *Paradox* takes over where Derrida leaves off. Lacoue-Labarthe supplements Derrida's notion of Diderot's 'logic of substitution' by accounting for a plastic notion of the imitator, actor or mime. Furthermore, as the close reader of the quotation above might have noticed, Derrida smuggles in the word "supposedly" before "anti-Platonic". This is Lacoue-Labarthe's cue for connecting Diderot's actor with his idea of a fundamental, productive mimesis, which, as we have suggested, both shapes and undercuts Plato's 'mimetology'.

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[58] See on this topic also M. Leonard, *Derrida and Antiquity* (2010).

[59] Lacoue-Labarthe writes about the notion of the 'mimetic machine' in relation to the eighteenth century German poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the Greeks in Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography* (1989).

[60] For a Diderotean account of the actor's ideal model see A. Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne. De la Raison classique à l'Imagination créatrice (1680-1814)* (1994).

[61] For Lacoue-Labarthe's perspective on the role of the phantom in modernism, see N. Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (2013).

3.3 Diderot's Paradox & the Actor's Imaginary Model

The Paradox of the Actor (published posthumously in 1830) was written by Diderot to offer a new way of thinking about how the theatre actor relates to the emotions of the character vis-à-vis their own. More than any of the existing acting theories at the time, Diderot addressed the psychological, physiological and pragmatic aspects of portraying characters and emotions on stage. Historically, the *Paradox* can be read as a critique on Fabio Sticotti's *Garrick, ou, les acteurs anglois* (first published in 1769) whose conception about English and French theatre was, according to Diderot, "so broad and so vague" that anyone could see their acting theory confirmed in it (Harriman-Smith 2015, 83–84; Diderot and Archer 1957, 11–14). The *Paradox* also presents a positive alternative to Rousseau's polemical 1758 essay, *Lettre à Mr. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, in which Rousseau formulates a Plato-inspired rejection of theatre and spectacles on the basis of its simulating and paralyzing character. Diderot's philosophical hymn to the theatre and the actor as a particularly rational human being manages to bypass most of Rousseau's concerns because, philosophically, Diderot has a different startingpoint. Acccording to Diderot, one cannot denounce the theatre on the bases of its simulating and therefore deceiving nature because theatre never aims for transparency in the first place. Diderot's philosophy of theatre is derivative of the general view that society as a whole is already composed of fictional and theatrical elements. In the theatre, personal and collective mimetic tendencies are put on display, i.e., they are put on a *second* stage, which means that they are mocked, exaggerated, and pushed to their emotional, physical and technical extremes. In Diderot's view, theatre is based on a social agreement and transparency respecting the basic condition of that encounter: that it is for show, that the actors act and that nobody gets hurt in the process. Diderot agrees with his opponent that theatrical mimesis results in "self-forgetfulness" in the actor and audience but disagrees that this disables their moral capacities (Marshall 1986, 91). Instead, Diderot turns Rousseau's qualification of self-forgetfulness into a virtue worth pursuing. *Vicariously* engaging in the emotions and actions on stage contributes to the development of a healthy ethics. This applies to the actor, the spectator and the social collective as a whole. For Diderot, human morality neither precedes nor transcends theatrical events, but depends to a large extent on them. Crucially, this implicates for Diderot a radical rejection of a Romantic notion of Nature. We will come back to this point[64]

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[62] For Derrida's understanding of mimesis in economic terms, see J. Derrida, "Economimesis" (1981b).

[63] Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy also see this logic at play in the way German Romanticism relates to the ancient tradition. In *The Nazi Myth*, they speculate about how the German's will for fiction and myth is intertwined with their absence of identity, see J-L. Nancy and Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Nazi Myth* (1990).

By focusing on the coherence, consistency, and longevity of a role, not just within the performance, but particularly with respect to its repeatability over a longer period of time, Diderot came to the counterintuitive claim that 'authentic' emotions on stage are hardly ever felt by the actors themselves. There is no identification at play, neither with the fictional character nor with the character's emotions. Instead, they focus on producing features that would allow the audience to believe in the illusion of the play. The actor's main occupation is hence to excel in the illusory tricks of the theatre so as to make the audience temporarily forget its illusory nature. This results in Diderot's first articulation of the paradox: characters are real insofar as they are faked. "Is Quinault-Dufresne Ororsmanes? No… Was he the man for the *Préjugé à la Mode*? No. Yet with how much truth he played it!" (Diderot and Archer 1957, 41). The imperative to counterfeit reality extends to the level of the actor's 'sensibility', which leads to the second affirmation of the paradox: "to move the audience the actor must himself remain unmoved." (Strasberg 1957, x)

Diderot famously classifies the actor as a distant and rational human being, especially in comparison to other members of society. In this context, what is important for our analysis is the following question: is the actor self-contained and observational by nature — are they 'born that way'? — or does the actor acquire these traits through training, hard work and experience? In Diderot's view, great actors, like great poets, seem to have a natural inclination to create and have no difficulty in seeing everyday situations in light of a potential poem or dramatic character. This means that a certain level of detachment comes naturally to them (Diderot and Archer 1957, 17). However, this inclination alone does not suffice. Diderot ultimately argues for a combination of nature and nurture: "It is Nature who bestows personal gifts–appearance, voice, judgment, tact. 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 Nature's gifts." (Diderot and Archer 1957, 12) In rehearsal, all these different elements come together and are synthesised in what Diderot calls *le modèle idéal imaginé*. The playwrite provides the 'rough' material for the imaginary model, which will be developed further by the actor during preparation. The actor's model is non-Platonic because it does not pre-exist and cannot function separately from the performance, it merely accompanies the actor's praxis; it is in the truest sense of the word, a *supplement*.

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[64] For a discussion on Diderot's and Rousseau's contrasting views on theatre, see D. Marshall, "Rousseau and the State of Theater" (1986); F. Ankersmit, "Pygmalion: Rousseau and Diderot on the theatre and on representation" (2003); P. Frantz, "Le théâtre déstabilisé. Diderot et la critique de Rousseau" (2013); R. Niklaus, "Diderot et Rousseau: Pour et contre le théâtre" (1963); in relation to the actor specifically D. Thomä, "Actorship, parrhesia, and Representation: Remarks on Theatricality and Politics in Hobbes, Rousseau, and Diderot" (2018). For Lacoue-Labarthe's interpretation of mimesis in Rousseau, see Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetics of History. Rousseau and the Theater of Originary Mimesis* (2019b).

It is the word 'supplement' that captures Lacoue-Labarthe's attention and which, according to him, makes Diderot's analysis stand out in the mimetic tradition. As we have seen in Derrida's analysis, Diderot's description of the actor working with an artistic model is in itself perfectly aligned with the neoclassical commonplace of art perfecting nature (Roach 2011, 125). However, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that Diderot's conception of the model as supplement is, against many of his predecessors' notions, *dual*.[65] Lacoue-Labarthe traces Diderot's supplement back to Aristotle's twofold definition of mimesis in *Physics*.[66] Let us look at a key passage from Book 2, which is also quoted and supplemented with commentary by Lacoue-Labarthe in his essay on Diderot:

> Aristotle says first (194a) that in general 'art imitates nature': *he techne mimeitai ten phusin*. Then, a little further on (199a) he specifies the general relation of *mimesis*: 'On the one hand, *techne* carries to it end [accomplishes, perfects, *epitelei*] what *phusis* is incapable of effecting [*apergasasthai*]; on the other hand, it imitates'. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 255; Aristotle 2005, 122-123/172-173; 194a/199a)

Lacoue-Labarthe points out that Diderot, at first sight, seems to conform to Aristotle's first –– what Lacoue-Labarthe calls *restricted* — definition of mimesis as simple imitation. The *Paradox* indeed opens with the following definition: acting is "the art of mimicking everything"

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[65] Lacoue-Labarthe echoes Derrida's notion of the supplement as being both a replacement and an accretion, which Derrida conceptualised and developed in *Of Grammatology* (1997).

[66] As a side note, but not unimportantly, it is surprising that Lacoue-Labarthe focuses here on Aristotle's *Physics* rather than his *Poetics* to explain something fundamental about how the subject of mimesis enters Western consciousness. In his interest in the workings of mimesis and the actor,[66] Lacoue-Labarthe is guided by materialist notions of the interplay between nature and art or fiction, which largely explains his fascination with Diderot.

(Diderot and Archer 1957, 14). Then Aristotle introduces the concept of *techne* (which may also include discipline, art, or craft), followed by a fascinating thesis: *techne* is necessary where nature proves to be insufficient. Apparently, there can be a shortage in nature itself, which can be compensated or supplemented with *techne*. Otherwise put, *techne* does something that nature cannot do.

Lacoue-Labarthe explains Aristotle's passage as follows. Mimesis in terms of replicating nature applies to human beings in exactly the same way as it applies to other species (Kirkkopelto 2014a, 124). Mimicking or mirroring is a fundamental feature of life, which can be found in animal behaviour and even plants.[67] In this respect, the actor who mimics simply does what most other creatures do. Diderot is aware of this 'naïve' idea of imitation and is quick to correct his earlier definition. He emphasises many times throughout the *Paradox* that mimicking is ultimately not what defines great acting because "nothing happens on the stage exactly as it happens in nature" (Diderot and Archer 1957, 13). Theatre differs from nature for the very simple reason that it presents things theatrically, that is, in an unusual setting, with unusual costumes and by means of (sometimes ancient) dramatic principles that nobody in real life would make use of. For that reason alone, imitation in the theatre is simply impossible (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 256). Now, the context for this is Diderot's rejection of an artistic principle central to Romanticism which is *self-expression*. Lacoue-Labarthe explains:

> Since the stage is in any case not life, it is difficult to see how mere re-presentation, and a simple reliance on the natural, could produce art. It is an uncompromising critique of the *naïve* conception of art: of art as native and natural, immediate and spontaneous (taking 'naïve' in the strict sense of the term, thinking of Schiller and a whole tradition of German aesthetics that will find in these analyses certain recourses). (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 256)

In contrast to simple imitation, then, *general* mimesis, i.e. *techne*, "re-produces nothing at all" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 255). Aristotle's definition of mimesis as *supplementation* refers to art in terms of the production of something that cannot be know in advance. General mimesis does not obey a nature vs art dichotomy, but substitutes that model for what Lacoue-Labarthe, for a lack of a better word, calls "*another presentation*—or the presentation of something other, which was not yet there, given, or present." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 257) Art complements nature in the sense that it exchanges nature's processes of repetition and imitation (which nature can perfectly produce by itself) for nature's production of 'other' features (which nature cannot produce by itself). What are these 'other' features and why is nature incapable of producing them?

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[67] For the notion of mimicry on plants and animals, see R. Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1984).

At first glance, one might think of the actor producing characteristics that differ from their own, which means that they have a special talent for transformation. The actor in that very literal sense becomes 'another'. This corresponds to what we have discussed in the context of Derrida's mime figure. The mime is a blank canvas, an empty template, a malleable creature that can take on any shape and function. This is indeed what Diderot, partially, has in mind. The actor has to have "the same aptitude for every sort of character and part." (Diderot and Archer 1957, 14) However, Lacoue-Labarthe detects a more fundamental feature that only theatrical mimesis is capable of effecting. What nature cannot do is present or exhibit the *ways* in which it appears (Kirkkopelto 2014a, 125). When the actor enters the stage, we are not only introduced to 'another' figure but, alongside that appearance, we are given the craft or technique through which that figure appears. Craft or technique is inextricable from nature's appearance yet nature itself is unable to make that into a work of art. Only human beings can use technical mimesis to make a work that simultaneously exhibits its means of production. This is why the theatre is a good entrance point for Lacoue-Labarthe: it enhances the dual nature of production as both the technique of producing as well as what it produces, i.e., the product. It is important to point out that the Diderotian model of supplementation does not resolve in a dialectics where, as in German Idealism, nature is yet again promoted as a metaphysical Absolute (Kirkkopelto 2014a, 125). Lacoue-Labarthe's insistence on Diderot's claim of the actor's art in terms of *technical work* ("technical skill in construction") shows his resilience against any discourse that claims purity, transparency and autopoiesis regarding nature and being (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 258).

Lacoue-Labarthe explains that the reason Diderot's actor escapes the autopoiesis claim is because, with his unusual understanding of the fictional model, he accounts for the staged subject as a figure constantly deconstructing itself. Diderot reverses the metaphysical model of the actor-artist who 'moulds' (and thus controls) its nature into a form, as it is the phantom-supplement that is awarded with superiority. The phantom's supplementation allows for new features to appear that cannot be reintegrated into a unified model of self-identity and self-presence. It is true that there is *poiesis* at play in terms of the actor developing its creative model. Yet that model fundamentally escapes the actor's own being as it is a mere phantom, a temporary, technical tool that makes the "magic of art" happen but that retracts the moment it is fixated and becomes inert (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 256). All the supplement does is provide the actor with the technical guidance to become the 'port-parole' of nature's production of mimesis. In this sense, the actor as mime, as *port-parole*, does not use mimesis, but rather "unchaines" it (Martis 2005, 154). We have arrived once more at Plato's earlier notes on theatrical mimesis in the *Republic*. The actor as "mimeticien" materialises a non-entitity, a pure medium. The mime offers its technical skills to produce a physical and vocal language that Lacoue-Labarthe calls miming: a totality of gestures and words that hovers between the material world and the world of phantoms, unable to be appropriated by anyone or anything in particular. What interests Lacoue-Labarthe in Diderot's paradox is that this is achieved *technically* and *theatrically*.

4. *Passive & Productive Mimesis*

In the following section I will discuss the mime's technique of producing a theatre of mimesis. Following Socrates's meditation on the affective power of mimetic performance in Book 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Lacoue-Labarthe investigates the physiological dimension of the concept of sensibility in relation to the mime figure. I will start with Lacoue-Labarthe's examination of the 'passive' relationship between spectator and audience based on Diderot's paradox. I will look specifically at the relation between sensibility and judgement, which provides the conceptual context for the mime's production of theatrical mimesis. I will then show in which sense Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Diderot's materialist account of the rational actor subverts the model of mimesis as passive possession.

4.1 *The Actor's Illusion*

Phenomenologically, we could sum up our previous discussion on the actor with the following description. The imaginary supplement allows the Diderotian actor to be attuned, in their ideal way, to what matters to the character in every scene in the play. It is the greatness of the model that determines the greatness of the actor, in light of which their own personhood is "reduced…to nothingness" (Diderot and Archer 1957, 63) The model is not a proscriptive set of rules that they must follow, like a manual, but more like a customized maxim that allows for a variety of decisions that are ideal in light of what the character is to evoke in that moment. Only through materialising their supplement, the actor can match the truth of what that character is about. Strictly speaking, the truth lies in the perception of the spectators, not in the ideal model or the performance. The technique of Diderot's actor is solely focused on what is perceived by the audience and how. Essential in this Diderotean technique is the absence of identification with the dramatic character. Diderot explains how the actor, through the model, creates the illusion of identification. Diderot foregrounds the theatrical ('mythical' of 'fictioning' as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy would say) moment in which the poetic realm takes over reality and replaces it with elements that look like they are 'really' there, but that are constituted as such *in the minds of the audience* due to the actor's technique. Compared to his opponents, Diderot reserves a big role for the spectator in the making of the illusion; they are not passive but active and complicit in the making of that fiction. What happens in a theatrical encounter can hence be seen as a reflection of the actors' work as much as a mirror of the audience's work. Diderot goes as far as saying that the illusion belongs entirely to the spectator, not to the actor.

Underlying Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Diderot lies his conviction that mimesis transgresses individual boundaries and involves collective participation. Exposure to the theatre means not only being passively influenced by the story but, more importantly, assumes the implicit collusion of the audience in the creation of fictions. Theatre is not only transitive in the sense of conveying messages, but also in terms of teaching or getting the audience used to the tricks of fiction, which involves the revelation that they themselves partake in the making of that construction. If we recall Socrates's objections against the affective power of mimetic performance, this two-way collusion can be extremely dangerous because it means that spectators start to feel the entitlement and authority over what happens in that dramatic encounter, whether it is sharing in the character's emotions or vicariously 'acting with' the violent escapades of the anti-hero (in classical plays). They do not look *at* the action, but they perform it *with* the actor. Through Diderot, Lacoue-Labarthe is able to show that what concerns Socrates is not (merely) the making of spectators into passive recipients compelled to surrender to 'organic weakness' but rather the opposite: the activation of their minds and imagination. This activating effect of the audience's mimesis complicates Socrates's idea of the theatre 'moulding' passive spectators into violent, irresponsible, morally dubious human beings; as if they would be completely oblivious to what happens to them. With Diderot, it would be more accurate to say that if the illusory work of the actor works it is largely because the audience wants it to work, and because they provide the imaginary precondition, or as Socrates would have it, the fiery inclination of the soul, that allows for that collective mimesis to succeed.

However, as Lacoue-Labarthe stresses once more, Diderot ultimately works with a reversed Platonic system so, for Diderot, the audience's participation in the magic of the evening does not necessarily resolve in negative, destructive, or unreflective behaviour, but may just as well result in the opposite, namely the cultivation of judgment [*jugement*]. In a Diderotian framework, a well-crafted scene in the theatre involves the experience of becoming the spectator of one's own actions, which is based on human insight and moral judgment. Judgment does not exclude being emotionally taken with the characters' fates but is in fact based on it. Diderot complicates the rationality vs sensibility binary: for him, being affected in the theatre is in fact the condition for rational reflection. Being taken by emotions is not synonymous to being passive. One can be possessed by laughter while being aware of the fact that that emotion is an effect of an accurate presentation of a duplicitous, hypocritical attitude, which you yourself may at times partake in. Diderot's understanding of the interaction between actor (or stage) and spectator hence challenges the clear-cut dichotomy between what is 'passive' and 'active with respect to the theatre. For Diderot, there is an essential interplay between the two, which means that one cannot fix its moral implications beforehand. This would imply a preconceived notion of what is passive and active according to a 'truth' that one had decided on in advance as the final model for evaluation (i.e., this is the gesture of Socrates). Therefore, Diderot, although working within a Platonic conceptual model, comes out at the complete other end of the philosophical spectrum.

What is important to understand regarding Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of the figures of Socrates and Diderot is that he is not out to set up a quarrel between the two. Rather, he wants to highlight that on a moral and physiological level, Socrates and Diderot to a large extend share the same intuitions and work within the same philosophical framework. At the same time, they draw opposite conclusions. Moreover, Diderot argues for the impossibility to decide once and for all whether theatrical mimesis is bad or good for you on a purely theoretical basis. Lacoue-Labarthe points out that Diderot's undecidability respecting the powers of mimesis lies at the heart of his frequent use of the logic of paradox. The fact that Diderot uses superlatives such as "the more mad, the more wise," "the more one is nothing, the more one can be everything," "the greater the philosopher, the bigger the buffoon, etc." shows that the underlying theatre/theory, or mythos/logos dualism that Socrates tries to fixate, is completely absent if not mocked by Diderot (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 252). As regards the actor's capacity to materialise both passive (becoming the object of human passions) and active (remaining a distant observer) traits, Diderot accounts for the paradoxical, unstable status of the actor. Paradox is for Lacoue-Labarthe yet another feature of a productive mimesis because it does not fixate a final model of mimesis onto the theatre-setting but allows for the exploration of the paradoxes at play in the problem of mimesis itself—for example, with respect to its assumed passive or active nature. On this matter, Lacoue-Labarthe merely wants to stress that, while Socrates did not consider the possibility of a productive mimesis, his careful meditation on the instability of human nature in the earlier passages of the *Republic* does allow for such a paradoxical account. It does however require a radical re-evaluation of what makes the mimetic enactment 'passive' or 'active' in the first place.

4.2 Man of Sensibility or Disinterested Onlooker?

On the basis of Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Aristotle's dual definition of mimesis, we have conceptualised how the actor, or mime, becomes the materialised supplement to nature. Technical skill allows them to produce a variety of features and functions while at the same time renouncing its subjective base or centre. The paradox of the actor entails the actor's substitution of their own nature for the productive material (the imaginary model) they themselves provide. Now, crucially, this also includes the substitution of the actor's 'sensitive' part. When the actor performs extreme emotional moments on stage, it is hard to imagine how these are anything but the actor's. And yet, Lacoue-Labarthe points out that Diderot can perfectly argue for the detached, neutralised actor because Diderot problematises the intuition that emotions are something that we passively undergo. Diderot functions again as a major figure in Lacoue-Labarthe's aim to show how our mimetic relation to human passions, sensibility and enthusiasm can be productive in the Diderotian sense.

Diderot's account of human nature reads like a constant torn between sensibility and judgment. (Roach 2011, 134–35). His notions of the "man of judgment" and the "man of sensibility" exemplify the two opposite extremes of the spectrum. The "man of sensibility" is a person who is emotionally affected by even the smallest events in life; they are constantly being tossed around by mood swings and are the victim of internal and external stimuli, which they feel they have no control over. Rather than possessing their body, they function as a slave to their sensible inclinations, which occupy their entire bodily constitution. Diderot explains sensibility in physiological terms. The epicentre of sensibility is the diaphragm, the area between the thorax and the abdomen, which can 'move' (vibration, trembling) autonomously from the subject as a whole. Furthermore, the man of sensibility is also the most likely to fall into mimetic behaviour, in the restricted sense of imitation. They absorb whatever comes their way, repeat other people's phrases like parrots, and tend to romanticise features and ideas that they are convinced they are the origin of but are nothing but reiterated platitudes (Kirkkopelto 2014a, 127). It is against this unreflective, naïve constitution that Diderot argues in the *Paradox*, and considers an unsuitable inclination for the profession of acting: "[as a man of sensibility] he relies on his quickness of wit and the habit of his calling, he will bear you down with his fire and the intoxication of his emotions, and you applaud him as an expert of painting might smile at a free sketch" (Diderot and Archer 1957, 64). The man of sensibility is possessed by the movements of their diaphragm, which are involuntary and make the human subject "resemble the shudders of an unintended, runaway machine," as Roach puts it (2011, 131). In this physiological sense, the man of sensibility is of the most passive kind.

The "man of judgment," on the other hand, is not per se rational, distant, and self-possessed by nature. They also do not lack sensibility altogether. Rather, through training, the man of judgment learns how to regulate the movements in their diaphragm. Diderot locates the regulatory function of the diaphragm in the brain and, again, the brain is to be understood in purely physiological terms. Diderot explains the brain's connection to the diaphragm through psychophysiological 'sympathy'. In *Éléments de physiologie*, Diderot writes: "the diaphragm is the center of all our pains and pleasures," but it is not necessarily its cause, it is only in "its liaison, its sympathy with the brain," that it is registered and felt as a pain or pleasure (Diderot 1964, 138; Roach 2011, 131). In other words, the brain 'registers' what happens in the 'machine' in terms of letting the human body as a whole experience that affect as 'frightful,' 'full of despair,' 'ashamed', etc. It is on this 'sympathetic' level between brain and diaphragm that Diderot's actor comes in and starts to train and cultivate its own sensitive constitution in favour of tranquillity. Rather than suppressing, ignoring, or specifically working against sensibility, the actor is said to work with and through it, to understand (not on a theoretical but practical level) its movements in light of its potential evocative power. Thus, the notion of judgement in its productive evocation works both in virtue of and despite the physical impact of the passions impersonated by the actor. Put differently, Diderot would say that physical exaltation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an actor to train its tranquillity and become a great actor. What matters is whether the actor can resist being physically absorbed by and instead transform what is acutely happening in the body. Hence he needs to mobilise and internalise the tools [*techne*] that help him "distract himself from himself." (Diderot and Archer 1957, 56) One of the most effective tools is imagination, which is why the imaginary model captures the essence of Diderot's conception of acting. It is through the "aid of a strong imagination" that the actor's passive mimesis is turned into — substituted for — a productive mimesis.

The crux of this Diderotian model is, says Lacoue-Labarthe, that there is a supplementary paradox — or "hyperbological" move, as he likes to call it — at play in the use of the notion of alienation. Diderot seems to imply that alienation applies to both passive mimesis, i.e., imitation or "frenzied possession," *as well as* the 'active' mode in which the actor is able to distance himself from himself. In the latter case, the actor becomes a distant observer of their own actions through channelling their imaginary figure. The moment in which the actor envisages their model, they are alienated from themselves; they are "two", says Diderot. That is, two consciousnesses that are irreducible to one another. Diderot writes in this respect about the doubling of the self in the case of the actress, Mlle. Clairon, envisaging herself 'in-the-mode-of' the ideal phantom while lying on her sofa: "to hear herself, see herself, judge herself, and judge also the effects she will produce. In such a vision she is double: little Clairon and the great Agrippina." (Diderot and Archer 1957, 16) This passage is crucial because it shows how Diderot keeps reversing the passive and productive models of mimesis. Diderot holds that the actor's ideal of self-possession, exemplified by Clairon, is based on being 'outside' oneself, which seems paradoxical. Apparently, for Diderot, self-mastery does not imply self-coincidence but the projection of oneself *outside* oneself instead. Lacoue-Labarthe: "Everything that appears in the form of self-possession, coolness, and mastery presupposes precisely a splitting of the self, an alteration, a being-outside-one-self; in short, alienation." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 262)

Intuitively, we tend to connect self-abundance with excessive emotionality, mystical, spiritual, and religious experiences or even madness; the opposite of mastery and self-control. In this context, Lacoue-Labarthe traces a link in Western history between sensibility and the notions of femininity and pathology. Diderot's views on this topic are to a large extend no exception, as Lacoue-Labarthe explains: "In the 'anthropological' order, passion is of course identified with femininity: one need only turn to the 'Essai sur les femmes' [by Diderot], which is an essay on possession, delirium, hysteria, and collective mania—passivity."[68] (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 263) In the *Paradox*, as well, Diderot claims that women are "far ahead of men" as regards inspiration and enthusiasm, yet when it comes to judgment, they fail to distance themselves from the immediacy of their diaphragm, an ability men naturally possess. Now, Lacoue-Labarthe points out that Diderot, once again, has a paradoxical relationship with the tradition. At first sight, Diderot reiterates what is commonplace in eighteenth century bourgeois France (a repetition of the same tradition since the Ancient Greeks) on the topics of sensibility, femininity, and possession. Namely, that women are by nature the victim of their sensibility given their organic weakness.[69] But why then would Diderot refer so often to female actors with praise? Could it be, as Marie-Hélène Chabut suggests, because he subverts the canon via the figure of the woman?[70]

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[68] In this context, Lacoue-Labarthe explicitely mentions Irigaray's genealogy of the "question of woman" in *Speculum of the other woman* (1974) and follows her in tracing the absent status of woman in the history of philosophy, see (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 129; footnote 128). I will explicitely discuss Irigaray's philosophy, and her take on the relation between passivity and the feminine, in the next chapter. I will do so by further developing Lacoue-Labarthe's distinction between general and restrictive mimesis in the context of Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference and the feminine mime.

It is exactly this subversion that is at stake in Diderot's reversal of the role of emotional possession (sensibility), on the one hand, and the role of distance through possession by the phantom (judgement), on the other. Indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe exposes another layer in Diderot's paradoxical writing: the relationship between the 'man of judgement' and their fictional model is, formally, *the same* as the relationship between the 'man of sensibility' and their diaphragm. Both function according to a model of self-abandonment and obey what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the "*law of impropriety*"— as we saw in Plato, the actor is said to be improper because it lacks a fixed and clearly defined identity or character (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 258).[71] However, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that there is a reversal of the passive vs active opposition at play in Diderot's thought, which deserves some extra attention.

Lacoue-Labarthe explains the reversal in the following manner. While the man of sensibility is possessed by the whims of his diaphragm and in that sense pushed 'out of himself', the man of judgment is possessed by his ideal phantom figure, his imaginary model, which is as much a form of self-loss as unbound enthusiasm is. The man of sensibility is out of himself because he lets his actions be ruled by the movements in his diaphragm, while the man of judgement is out of himself because his actions are configured by his phantom model. Both inclinations involve the destabilisation and alienation of the performer vis-à-vis the self.

One might object that, phenomenologically, those two dispositions constitute two fundamentally different experiences. Lacoue-Labarthe would probably agree with that statement but respond that on a formal level they reflect the same "mimetologic" (mimetic mechanism) (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 260). Both forms of possession posit the actor out of themselves, thereby reducing the human figure to a pure mime, a Jack-of-all-trades that operates as a "port-parole" for whatever it is that needs to be conveyed. The sole difference is that the man of judgment uses technique (*technē*), which means that he is, paradoxically, giving *himself* the "gift," in Lacoue-Labarthe's words, of becoming the disinterested onlooker of their own actions. This is where Lacoue-Labarthe flips Diderot's paradox over to its opposite: the man of judgment is not favoured because they can resist being possessed, but because they excel in substituting one form of possession for another. The actor's productive possession (by the phantom model) is favoured over passive possession (by the diaphragm) because it means that they are in control not of themselves but of the paradox of being simultaneously captivated *and* clear minded, and more or less comfortable in the vertigo it creates.[72] They might undergo the most extreme human passions on stage and yet they are not out of control or go mad: they have created an internal distance towards the immediate effects of their physical disturbances. In short, they sustain the "liaison" between diaphragm and brain. This is the mastery Diderot has in mind and based on which Lacoue-Labarthe will critique Platonic mimesis. Passive and active mimesis are not, as Plato wants to argue, opposites but rather paradoxically intertwined. In Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis, the Diderotian actor is exemplary of a reversed Platonic mimesis: the actor exposes and experiments with the productive possibilities of self-alienation implied in the paradox of mimesis. This subverts the passive vs active configuration that Platonic mimesis wants to stabilise.

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[69] Despite his conservative stance on the subject, Diderot often refers to female performers and praises their talent for acting. The practice of Mlle. Clairon is frequently used by Diderot to show how judgment is ideally applied, thus taking the female figure to exemplify his preferred model of acting. This is yet another feature of Diderot's subtle twisting of traditional values with respect to the connection between sensibility and "natural" femininity.

[70] In "Female as Other: The Subversion of the Canon through Female Figures in Diderot's Work," Chabut analyses several female figures in the work of Diderot and convincingly shows how they are exemplary of a typical Diderotian trademark, which is "the association of the a-systematic and 'le génie' with women," which completely turns the commonplace of the stupidity of women on its head (Ghabut 1998). This account perfectly aligns with Luce Irigaray's understanding of subversive mimesis in her philosophy of the feminine, which we shall discuss in the third chapter.

[71] Derrida formulates Lacoue-Labarthe's withdrawal of the subject as 'desistance' in his introduction to *Typography* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 1–42); see also J. Martis, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Representation and the Loss of the Subject* (2005, 193–227).

4.3 Onto-Typology Revisited

Informed by the Diderotian actor, Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the mime, then, wants to account for an organic malleability combined with the cultivated awareness that while the materiality of the subject can conform to any model, it can never be reduced to it. This is manifest in the actor's technique, which navigates between the movements between diaphragm and brain, and makes sure that they are at all times structured around the ideal phantom. Against this background, the idea of a subject not coinciding with itself, which is the essence of Diderot's paradox — "it is because he [the actor] is nothing that he is before all everything" — does not mean that the actor is a blank, meaningless, passive, a *point zéro*. Its practice consists of *doing* something with what might occur, emotionally, in the body and in the mind. The reason why Lacoue-Labarthe is so interested in Diderot's model of the actor is because it reveals something crucial about the human subject as mimetic being.

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[72] In *La poésie comme expérience*, Lacoue-Labarthe discusses the notion of vertigo in the context of his aim to reverse the mastery of logos. It is not due to *us* that we are speaking creatures, says Lacoue-Labarthe. Rather than assuming an original, intimate, or intuitive relation to language and speaking and claim legitimacy and authority over what we say, we must say instead that sentences *come to us*. When uttering a sentence, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, we must understand this against the background of us being unfamiliar with the words: "nothing and no one [...] can be at the origin of the sentence" (1986a, 20; my translation). It is on these grounds that Lacoue-Labarthe will say that we are ultimately the sign of "nothing". Nothing because the words we speak designate nothingness, i.e., they are without origin. The experience of nothingness, then, manifests in the feeling of vertigo. Murena explains Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of vertigo as the human impossibility of "perfection" and its intricate relation to a loss of self (Murena 2016, 56–58). See also his doctoral thesis, "Le 'mime de rien' de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe : phrase, théâtre, philosophie." See http://www.ens-lyon.fr/evenement/recherche/le-mime-de-rien-de-philippe-lacoue-labarthe-phrase-theatre-philosophie. For further reading on the loss of the subject in Lacoue-Labarthe, see John Martis, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Representation and the Loss of the Subject* (2005). I will discuss the issue of vertigo further in the next section of the chapter which is about Lacoue-Labarthe's theatre of sobriety. I will also make use of his poetical writing *Phrase* (2018) in which his conception of vertigo plays a central role.

If we say, with Aristotle and Plato, that human beings are mimetic, it does not imply that we only imitate at random, passively. Lacoue-Labarthe does not contest the existence of a passive mimesis, in fact, it is important to acknowledge that we are often unreflectively, mimetically, connected to each other. We are all under the influence and conditioned by our surroundings, which implicates replicating historical, cultural and genetical traces. In this sense, we cannot not repeat, duplicate, echo, and imitate what lies outside of our individual control. And yet, by shifting the act of imitation to a more technical (in the sense of the actor's technique) account of mimetism, Lacoue-Labarthe can pose the following question: is there a way of accounting for the mimetic human subject that, despite his/her mimetic disposition, he/she is freed of its determinations? To be sure, for Lacoue-Labarthe, this entails not freedom *from* but *in* mimesis. Rather than closing oneself off from (theatrical) mimesis, the classic Platonic move, which in Lacoue-Labarthe's view is doomed to fail, he suggests, with Diderot, *verifying* mimesis instead. Verifying mimesis means understanding its function specifically in relation to the subject. Lacoue-Labarthe is hence less interested in answering the metaphysical question "what is the mime?" or "what is the mimetic subject"? Instead, he focuses on investigating the different manifestations of the mimetic by asking when and according to which mimetic procedures the subject appears. In this light it would be more appropriate to ask the question "in favour of which function of mimesis does the subject appear?". The actor is the perfect gateway to explore this question because it is the actor's subjectivity that is problematised on stage from the start. Moreover, the actor shows us that mimesis is always already at play because it is, for the actor, the question of its very appearance.

In addition to the actor's imperative to be "nothing," and therefore "everything," we must take seriously the role of plasticity. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the possibility to become everything needs the condition of absolute plasticity because otherwise the potential of exceeding our passive inclinations (and to indeed be reduced to one figure), violates our human constitution. Lacoue-Labarthe connects his analysis of the actor indeed to a general human condition. Lacoue-Labarthe's idea of the plasticity of mimesis refers to a generalised paradox where the human subject is infinitely and indefinitely caught up in the exchange between models, or in Derrida's words, supplements. The supplemantary 'stamp' of the model is however not given from the outside, but it is the "gift" that the subject gives itself, it is their "gift of nature," in Lacoue-Labarthe's rephrasing of Aristotle. The subject stamps on itself a model or type, which simultaneously performs the withdrawal of that subjective base. There is no external metaphysical model that can free the self from this hyperbolic escaping of itself. It is on the basis of this so-called "hyperbologic" that the self is freed from itself. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this is fundamentally what the actor's appearance on stage amounts to: they are not solely presenting as a character but also evoking the substitutive dimension of the self where it can at any given time slip in and out of other characters, voices, animated selves. He suggests that this applies to the subject in general.

Once again it is important to emphasise, and here we touch again on Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of Plato, that saying the subject is plastic does not mean that its ontological exchange of figures is *only* passive and random. Contrary to Plato's account of the mime as a "blank page," Lacoue-Labarthe maintains that the mime cannot be reduced to being a neutral 'mimeticien' or puppet in the sense of designating a blank slate that only perceives and receives what comes from outside. The difference between the puppet and the Lacoue-Labarthean mime is that the former repeats exactly what you want, while the latter can give you what you want but never in the manner you expect because it cannot be tied to any recognisable model or figure. It does not give you the pure imitated model, but rather the enactment of the impossibility of incarnating the model *while showing you the model.* This is the paradox and confusion that underlies the theatre situation, and the deconstructive element at play in the actor's relation to itself.

Furthermore, it is not because the mime, or the subject more generally, is capable of evoking all kinds of characters that it needs to do so. It can *potentially* do so, but as much as the subject cannot, on a metaphysical level, be the "active" master of mimesis, it cannot be its "passive" victim either, because there is nothing inherently deterministic about the subject's relation to mimesis. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, it is inscribed in mimesis's paradoxical nature that it produces both the means of being affected by or stamped on by models, and the means to configure and endow the subject with an internal distance towards their fixating power. Lacoue-Labarthe concludes from this that, in analogy with the actor, the subject can at best exhibit and expose mimesis's paradox and, in doing so, explore its moral, aesthetic, and ontological implications. But what it precisely cannot do is decide on them in advance. In this context, Lacoue-Labarthe's operative matrix of "mimesis without a model," with which this chapter opened, does not designate the absence of models or figures per se but the fact that the subject can enter through the sheer surface of figurations without being the sole referent of any one defined figure.

Lacoue-Labarthe's theatrical and material account of mimetism also suggests a critique of Platonic mimesis on an intersubjective level. As general mimesis applies to individual as well as collective entities, Lacoue-Labarthe's alternative, Diderotian inspired model of dramatic mimesis places Plato's passive understanding of the relationship between spectator and performer in a different light. If we follow Plato in his claim that spectators in the audience tend to imitate the fictive characters on stage, what *exactly* do they imitate? Plato's conviction that we only passively undergo represented emotions and actions is largely based on his observations regarding the visual power of mimetic performance. Spectators are literally overpowered by the emotional and dramatic effects of the spectacle. Through Diderot and Lacoue-Labarthe, we have acquired an alternative model of theatrical mimesis, in which the means to resist simple imitation are implicated in other kinds of mimetisms that might already be in place, independently of how strong the visual presentation is.

The implication of Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive analysis is that if human beings are mimetic, they are not only mimetic in terms of copying behaviour that they have obtained visually (an important but narrow definition), they are equally mimetic in their absorption of the exhibiting tools provided by theatrical acting. Fiction or myth are not in themselves critical but the human effort "to fiction" can become a topic, a question, a problem on the stage. In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, theatrical mimesis reveals and exhibits the paradoxes and ambivalences that come with the human effort for fictioning. To be sure, our desire for "fictioning," as he and Nancy often call it, is a mimetic inclination but it is also a possibility condition that structures human beings in their relationship with the world. By foregrounding the theatricality implicated in this structure, we acknowledge the capacity to expose (rather than being passively subjected to) the means of and desire for fictioning.

4.4 So What About the Theatre?

André Hirt argues in his book on Lacoue-Labarthe, that the theatre does not represent something but presents the gesture of representing (Hirt 2009, 41–43). According to Hirt, Lacoue-Labarthe wants to point our attention to a different definition of theatre than we are (possibly under the influence of Aristotle's account of tragedy and the theatre as visual representation) used to. The theatre is not there to direct us to ideas, emotions, and ideals, but to display the *signs* that point to those models. Theatre is about the exposition according to which those signs come to be. This might look like an insignificant nuance, but it makes all the difference, especially if we consider the question of the political and ethical in relation to mimesis and the stage. There is a significant difference between, what Lacoue-Labarthe expressed many times in his critical readings of Heidegger, the acknowledgement that we are all participating in the "world's stage" or the "fiction of culture," on the one hand, and the purposeful forgetting of the theatrical construction (which is what he accuses Heidegger of doing) — the technique involved in the mimetic construction of the subject — inherent in our most basic understanding of being and human existence, on the other.[73]

The simultaneity of absorption and distance, which we analysed in the context of Diderot, and for which Lacoue-Labarthe also uses the terms *émoi* and *sobriété*, which we will discuss in the forthcoming and final part of this chapter, indicates a deconstructive move within mimesis itself that allows the spectator to be engaged in the event, to be affected by it, but without being entirely enveloped in one-dimensional messages, emotions and/or figures. It is important to stress once more that Lacoue-Labarthe agrees with Plato that there is a responsibility on those who design theatre productions and expose them to a large audience. The fact that its moral and political implications cannot be not known in advance does not mean that the theatre — and one can extend the theatre to the world and political stage — is devoid of moral responsibilities. However, for Lacoue-Labarthe, there is no theoretical solution to this matter except for pointing at the creators' modest responsibility in staying true to what he called the gift of the theatricality of mimesis (or, in line with Diderot, the gift of impropriety): their purpose is to display the act of fictioning, not to make the audience forget about the fact there is a construction involved in what they experience.

We have investigated the mime figure in Lacoue-Labarthe to show that the distortion of all plain forms of mimesis are based on the logic of paradox. If one wants to address the potential subversive power of mimesis, this implies looking at the ways in which already existing mimetisms manifest on stage, in the situated and material sense. To repeat Lacoue-Labarthe's voicing of Diderot: "passons au théâtre" (Diderot 2000, 112).

5. *Exhibition/Exposition: A Theatre of Sobriety*

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[73] For example, he is critical of Heidegger for not being "sober" enough in his appropriation of the works of Hölderlin, see Lacoue-Labarthe's essay, "Il Faut" (1997). For more on Lacoue-Labarthe's general critique of Heidegger, see "La poésie comme experience" (1986a), "Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political" (1990), and "Typography," in *Typography* (1989, 43–95).

What comes to the fore in Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion of the many accounts of the relation between theatre and mimesis, from Plato and Aristotle to Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Rousseau, and Diderot, is not their antagonisms (their internal disagreements are well-known at this point) but their linkage.[74] The role of the theatre and the theatrical within their philosophies of mimesis is not (or not *only*) one of hostility. What Lacoue-Labarthe wants to make plausible is the idea that their ultimate conclusions on the character of dramatic mimesis is rooted in a similar, double concern: that of *constraint* and *fascination*. And we can add Lacoue-Labarthe to this list of thinkers. It should not come as a surprise that Lacoue-Labarthe himself also expressed a resilience against visiting and working in the theatre, as becomes clear in one of his many unpublished notes on the theatre. In conversation with Jean-Pierre Vincent on January 18th, 1993, at the office of the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre, he explains:

> I would say, simply, that I came to the theatre with abstract ideas. First of all, I was bored with the theatre. Like for many people of my generation, the theatre was a profound bore. That is, you didn't know how to see it - I didn't know how to see it. When Deutsch asked me to work with him, I came with these abstract ideas which, basically, came from the situationists and were relayed, for people like me, by work on Heidegger, Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (all the work that was done in the seventies around Nietzsche). I came to it through certain examples of theatre outside the walls (André Engel) ... And then I realised gradually, laboriously, that that's not where it's happening. It's not at the level of these great ideas, or even theories about representation or not representation. (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 164; my translation)

Lacoue-Labarthe, Bailly and Deutsch, who later became close collaborators in the theatre, had arrived at a point in history in France where theatre was no longer evidently part of a cultural, progressive movement where intellectuals went for inspiration and ideas.[75] As Deutsch writes on the back cover of his *Souvenir épars: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, les année théâtre* (2018), when they started working in the theatre, they had to rethink its purpose entirely: "What does the theatre want? What can theatre do? After 1968, when most certainties collapsed, it was up to us to question once again what the 'artistic will' of the theatre in France really was." (2018; my translation) Of all of Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical work on theatre via the concept of mimesis, it was perhaps only Hölderlin and Diderot that helped him reinvent the theatre from within.

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[74] Lawtoo also speaks of Lacoue-Labarthe's attempt to overcome antagonisms, the ancient antagonism between philosophy and literature via the concept of mimesis, in particular, which he discusses — among other places — in the context of Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in "The Horror of the West [L'horreur occidentale]". See Lawtoo, *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (2016) and Lacoue-Labarthe, "L'horreur occidentale" (2007b).

[75] Around the same time, Gilles Deleuze expressed a similar disinterest and boredom with the theatre in a video conversation with Claure Parnet, entitled *L'Abécédaire*: "I don't go to the theater because theater is too long, too disciplined, it's too… it's too… it does not seem to be an art that… except in certain cases, except with Bob Wilson and Carmelo Bene, I don't feel that theater is very much in touch with our era, except for these extreme cases." (Boutang and Pamart 1996)

In Hölderlin's idea of *sobriety*, Lacoue-Labarthe saw a first point of departure to reinvent the scene because it allowed him to develop the idea of the "bare" stage: a mise-en-scène devoid of any sense of the theatrical (in the sense of grand, overly dramatic, epic, overpowering).[76] Together with his colleagues, he wanted to explore a theatre *without* theatre: a dispossessed stage or scene, drained of any form of spectacle:

> I'm going to look for another word in Hölderlin: it's the principle of sobriety, which is the opposite, therefore, of all forms of hysterisation [*hystérisation*], and which is, I would say, the condition of thought. This is what I expect from theatre, from art in general. To offer as little as possible to any phenomenon of identification, which does not mean, once again, to forbid emotion. That's the confusion we generally make.[77] (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 168; my translation)

In this passage, Lacoue-Labarthe explains an important nuance regarding the notion of sobriety reminiscent of Diderot's paradox. Sobriety is the *counterpoint* of excessive emotion based on identification while being *compatible* with emotion as such. Let us unpack this conceptual nuance, before exploring its implication for his alternative account of the scene of mime.

5.1 Sobriety Excludes Identification as Possession

The first conception, sobriety as the opposite of mimetic possession and identification, must be understood against the background of Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Hölderlin's departure from the tradition of Early German Romanticism, emerging from German Idealism, which I will only briefly sketch out for context.[78] In his essay "Hölderlin and the Greeks," Lacoue-

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[76] In his first letter to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff, Hölderlin speaks of a "abendländische junonische Nüchternheit," see "An Casimir Ullrich Böhlendorff," in *Werke und Briefe* (1969, 926–29).

[77] Lacoue-Labarthe refers to what Benjamin in response to Hölderlin rephrased as the 'principle of the sobriety of art' [*Satz von der Nüchternheit der Kunst*]. See W. Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (2008). See also Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, "Introduction to Walter Benjamin's 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism'" (1992).

[78] Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) was a German poet and philosopher and a central figure in German Romanticism. Hölderlin has been a key figure in Lacoue-Labarthe's work on German Romanticism and his notion of the inextricable bond between the practice of translation and mimesis. Lacoue-Labarthe's most notable publication (with Nancy) on this topic is a study on the emergence of the notion of literature in German Romanticism, entitled *The Literary Absolute* (1988) as well as his essay "Hölderlin and the Greeks," in *Typography* (Lacoue Labarthe 1989, 236–47). The latter will be the central focus in my analysis.

Labarthe explains how Hölderlin's contemporaries appropriated "the Greeks" via a "dialectical resolution." They wanted to "complete" the Greeks through imitating them (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 237).[79][80] Hölderlin's position among these Romantic thinkers — or those associated with romanticism, such as Winckelmann, Schiller and Goethe — is what is of interest to Lacoue-Labarthe. Rather than opposing himself to his contemporaries by, for example, simply ignoring their work on the Greeks, Hölderlin instead made the Greeks his main topic. However, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin's writings differed fundamentally from those of his peers. I want to highlight here the way Hölderlin went about his literary project because it is illustrative of the practice of sobriety that Lacoue-Labarthe is trying to make a case for.

In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, Hölderlin showed a great solidarity with the work of his contemporaries, such as Winckelmann and Schiller. This solidarity was manifest not merely in his intellectual dependence on them but also in acknowledging their influence through critically assessing them. In doing so, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, Hölderlin gave an important insight about the unconscious mimetic bond that one has with one's peers — he speaks of a "mimetic submission" in this regard (1989, 241). To ignore his colleagues would be a case of bad faith as one cannot *decide* to not be influenced by one's collegues. Put in another way, Hölderlin accepts that he is despite himself (perhaps against his will) mimetically related to and influenced by his peers (and more broadly speaking, absorbed by the German, modern conception of the Ancients). What does this imply? The underpinning of the intellectual linkage with his contemporaries meant that he could not *not* work on the Greeks for the simple reason that the topic of Antiquity was omnipresent at that time in Germany.[81] From Lacoue-Labarthe's perspective, this attitude of humility is first and foremost a humility towards the function and inevitability of mimesis; he would call this a "general" form of mimesis. Hölderlin does not combat or ignore the fact that he is subjected to mimetic mechanisms, which shows a self-awareness that his German romantic contemporaries lacked.

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[79] Lacoue-Labarthe illustrates his point by referring to a statement by the German art historian and archeologist, Johann Winckelmann, who writes: "The only way we can become great, and, if this is possible, inimitable, is by imitating the Ancients." See Winckelmann, *Réflexions sur l'imitation des oeuvres grecques en peinture et en sculpture* (1954, 95).

[80] According to Lacoue-Labarthe, thinkers within the tradition of Early German Romanticism had a very specific understanding of 'the Greeks', which he elaborates in "Hölderlin and the Greeks": "It means […] what could be imagined and posited as a *being of nature*. Which is also to say, correlatively, what the modern *beings of culture* could no longer even hope to become again, however powerful their nostalgia, since, as Schiller said, 'nature in us has disappeared from humanity.' Thus, one considers Greek, or naïve, the poet who is *nature*, who 'only follows simple nature and feeling, and limits himself solely to the imitation of actuality'; on the other hand, the poet who *seeks nature* or desires it, as though called by the lost maternal voice, is modern, or 'sentimental.'" In other words, according to this definition, art is only 'proper' if it goes back to nature, but this gesture or sentiment is impossible for 'we', the moderns, have forever lost that intuitive bond with nature: this bond is only proper to the Greeks. Thus, the only way to accomplish art (in this intuitive way) is to, indirectly, go back to the Greeks, mimetically appropriate them, and in doing so move beyond and "accomplish" them: "it is up to the Moderns to go a step beyond the Greeks—to 'accomplish' them." (1989, 236–47, 238) In this fragment, Lacoue-Labarthe is citing from Friedrich Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1966, 103).

[81] Lacoue-Labarthe even speaks of an obsession: "Nowhere else are the Greeks to this extent an obsession." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 237)

When Hölderlin finally worked on the Greeks, in particular their works of theatre (the Greek tragedies), and started reflecting on his task of translating them, he realised that it is impossible to imitate "the Greeks" in the way that his colleagues proposed (in short, it entailed copying a certain intuitive relation between nature and art that the moderns deemed "proper" to the Greeks, and found desirable because of their own lack thereof). In his 1801 letter to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff, Hölderlin writes: "imitation of Antiquity… it is probably not allowed for us … to have with the Greeks anything identical" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 247; Hölderlin 1984, 926–27). The Greeks will always remain alien or foreign not only to a modern thinker but also and even more importantly to themselves. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, what Hölderlin captured in his translations, was the Greek gift of saying things without explicitly saying them, hereby allowing for an irreducible foreignness to remain present within the texts. So, true to the initial function of the ancient writings, Hölderlin's translations made "the Greek text say what it said endlessly *without ever saying it.*" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 247) The revolutionary aspect of Hölderlin's translations of the Greeks, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, is hence that it is a testimony of the fact that the Greek texts did not reduce or transform what could not be said to what could be said in an effort to make the writings unequivocal (and imitable, that is, easy to identify with). Hölderlin was daring enough to, against his contemporaries, show that the Ancients are "*inimitable*" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 246).

What Hölderlin found was that the Greeks were concerned with the foreign, that is, with otherness *as* difference, a gesture that was implicated in their own self-understanding. By analogy, Hölderlin's opposition to the Greeks was not motivated by "the desire or the will to reunite these oppositions and to produce, as Hegel will say, reconciliation," which he saw at work in Schiller. Rather, he kept the difference and the foreign in place (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 239). What Lacoue-Labarthe learned was that, in contrast to Hölderlin, the German romantics did not include the possibility (or forgot the fact) that the Greeks themselves had incorporated a difference or otherness with respect to themselves, which made them impossible to copy.[82]

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[82] In "Hölderlin and the Greeks," Lacoue-Labarthe elaborates the Greek notion of the foreign and its implication for our understanding of the Greeks now: "If we must undergo the experience of this foreign element, nothing in what is accessible to us of the Greeks can be of any help to us whatsoever. Because they never appropriated what was their proper, nothing of the Greek being could ever be recovered. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 246)

Coming back to the concept of sobriety. The brief outline of Lacoue-Labarthe's argument above shows the paradoxical nature of Hölderlin's mimetic technique of translation: by allowing the failure of a proper translation to prevail over the will to stay "true" to the Greek text, he probably came closer to Greek thought than his contemporaries did. The lapses in his translations showed the acknowledgement of the blind spots in his own literary project, while leaving space for otherness intrinsic to the Greek texts to come to the surface, and for the readers to discover by themselves. This is the "principle of the sobriety of art" (as Benjamin called it) at work (Benjamin 2008). Hölderlin's work on the Greeks shows a sobriety not only towards ancient thought but also in relation to his colleagues. Rather than dismissing their work by calling it an act of "misrepresenting" the Greeks (which was what they accused him of doing), he learned from them what was modern about his own thinking, which in turn was an essential step in his reworking of the Greeks. It led him, for example, to question what Greek tragedy should be in the light of inquiring irreducible difference. Must we, moderns, not also radically rethink the notion of Greek tragedy and the theatre it requires—instead of starting from how we think the Greeks envisioned their tragedies only to then "critically" "surpass" them?

We have indirectly answered the question in which sense Hölderlin managed to work mimetically on the Greeks (which is what in Lacoue-Labarthe's view translation amounts to: "working across the terrain of mimesis" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 242)) without being *possessed* by them. But we can pose the question even more sharply: Why is this attitude of sobriety opposed to emotional possession and identification?

Hölderlin's paradoxical position among his contemporaries and vis-à-vis the ancients allowed him to never fully fall together with either cold rejection or critique (antagonism) or possession (identification). Swimming against the current of his time, which was characterised by being completely absorbed by the Greeks and relying on them for their own identity and authority, Hölderlin only absorbed what was inevitable, namely the omnipresent modern (Romantic) notion of the Greeks. In turn, by "wrongly" translating the Greeks he exhibited or exposed an irreducible otherness or foreignness in the source material as well as regarding his own authorship. Contrary to his peers, then, Hölderlin made works of art marked by dispossession or "disappropriation," as Lacoue-Labarthe calls it (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 243). To use the metaphor of the theatre, it is as if the lead actor walked out of the theatre in the middle of a scene during the performance and let the play continue without him or her. The nothingness that is left behind on the stage is irretrievable, unverifiable, and not "available" to be overcome or reintegrated into a new unity through an underlying teleological or dialectical model. Hölderlin's mimetic endeavour is gravitating around a nothingness (the "nothing" of identity, or loss of the subject, as Martis calls it), and he acknowledges — even *exposes* — this "nothing". This excludes possession though identification, because possession through identification gravitates around a centre of identity or presence of the subject.

For Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin's sober undertaking is exemplary of *technically* — similar to what we discussed in relation to the Diderotian actor — producing internal distance, pause, or otherness, in the work of art itself, which guards off the full absorption involved in identification, enthusiasm and possession. As Beatrice Hanssen formulates it in the context of Benjamin's interpretation of Hölderlin's poems, "sobriety [operates] as a necessary limit to a perilous state of ecstatic self-loss." (1997, 795).

5.2 Émoi: Mimetic Affect & the Weakening of the Subject

We have established Lacoue-Labarthe's first feature of sobriety, it's resilience against mimetic identification, but what about the second feature: the affective dimension of sobriety? Before we can explore how the concept of sobriety is manifest in the theatre or, more precisely, the question of what kind of theatre, what kind of *exposition of mimesis*, is produced by the state of sobriety, we must be able to explain the coincidence of sobriety and affectivity. Alongside Lacoue-Labarthe's notes on the theatre, we will read some passages from Lacoue-Labarthe' poetical text, *Phrase* (2017), and zoom in on the notion of *émoi*.

How to account for the resilience against "hyserisation" while allowing for emotion at the same time? When Lacoue-Labarthe says that hysterisation should not be equated with emotion, what kind of other emotionality is he talking about? Indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe has something quite specific in mind and emotion might even be a misleading word in the larger context of his work. In *Ending and Unending Agony* (2015), his book on Maurice Blanchot, Lacoue-Labarthe introduces the notion of *émoi*, which perhaps best captures the subtlety of emotion we are looking for.[83] In Hannes Opelz's helpful translator's note, he breaks down the etymological meaning of *émoi*, linking it to the Old French *esmai*, from "esmayer," which means "to trouble, disturb," and the Latin "exmagare," meaning "to divest of power or ability." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2015, xi) *Émoi* seems to carry a double sensation, that of disruption and collapse of ability and power. Opelz remarks that this double meaning of *émoi* in Lacoue-Labarthe presents a different picture of emotionality than we are used to. Perhaps we think of emotion along the lines of Plato's excitement of the soul, something that executes and induces the subject with "energy" and "force," which can make them feel "empowered" because it triggers an immediate response (2015, xi). *Émoi* however is the opposite of what we just described: it is the feeling of disturbance and shuts down the self's power to act. *Émoi* is not the kind of disturbance of being swept away by a sensation, which can be joyful, uplifting, self-affirming. Rather, the disturbance linked to the experience of *émoi* is that of disquiet: it is the disruption of the stability of the self that is unsettling. What makes the notion of *émoi* unsettling is the experience of powerlessness, disability, even *agony*. It is indeed agony that informs Lacoue-Labarthe's work on *émoi* in Blanchot and which takes centre stage in his analysis of the function of *émoi* in Theodor Reik's psychoanalytic writings on music in his book *The Haunting Melody* (1953) in "The Echo of the Subject" (1989, 139–207). I will briefly elaborate on this example, because it will be a good gateway into the connection between *l'émoi* and Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the sober theatre and actor, which will bring us back to the central theme of this chapter.

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[83] Lacoue-Labarthe's text "L'émoi" was first published in the review *Digraphe* (1978) and was written as a response to Blanchot's "Une scène primitive," which was first published in *Première livraison* (1976). "L'émoi" was reprinted in *Phrase* (2000) and "Une scène primitive" was reprinted in *L'écriture du désastre* (1980).

Reik explores the idea of singing a haunting melody, which is a phenomenon that short-circuits our capacity of theorisation and concrete action. Singing a melody that comes from elsewhere but that nevertheless occupies the self, "has the same meaning as when I am laughing, crying, sighing or sobbing. It is the same tears, sneers or cheers," Reik explains (1953, 249–50). In "The Echo of the Subject," Lacoue-Labarthe shows how Reik's description of the phenomenon of singing a haunting melody is of the order of *l'émoi*:

> Reik has touched upon a phenomenon that, despite the catharsis, begins to exceed and broach the subject's economy, and ruin it from within. Laughter and tears, sarcasm and cheers, all those emotions—social or 'intersubjective,' as they say—in which consciousness disappears and the body is in spasms, where there is produced a suspension or a fundamental and rendering 'caesura,' all of them are perhaps of the order of *l'émoi*. Meaning *powerlessness*. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 189)

The singing of a haunting melody has the same impact on body and mind as emotion does: their "meaning" is comparable. Lacoue-Labarthe would argue that is because one cannot trace their (single) origin. What makes a melody (importantly, not the singing of actual words) haunting is that one cannot go back to its beginning or source, it is suddenly there, and it will not leave. A similar "unconscious" process (in Reik's psychoanalytic terms) occurs when we are captured by certain ruches of emotionality; bursting out in laughter or tears, cheering, or being overcome by physical spasms: they seem to come out of nowhere and yet it is *you* who produces them. In other words, what emotions and melodies, falling within the domain of *l'émoi,* have in common is that they expose a paradoxical state in which one produces emotional forces that are both alien and at the same time strangely intimate to the self. In Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology, *l'émoi* not only touches on but also puts on display the internal "caesura" or split of the self in this phenomenon.

For Lacoue-Labarthe, what is also important is the implication of this phenomenon for Reik's own writing: does this problematisation of the self, explained through the notion of *l'émoi* travel to and penetrate the status, the authority, of his writing? Or does he distil, "decide on," a finalising theory about these unconscious processes of music? In fact, Reik does not: he postpones his theoretical endeavour and, in the process, exposes the collapse of the (theorising) self in his handling of the subject. In a later passage, Reik is humbled by the phenomenon of the haunting melody and breaks off his pursuit in the middle of his analysis:

> But where do we go from here? It would now be necessary to present a psychological theory of what comprises the emotional character as well as the esthetic [sic] value of music, to probe into the mystery of why certain sound waves affect us this way. It means it would be necessary to enter the realm of musical theory, including the science of acoustics. At this point, I again become painfully aware of my incompetence. I am as equipped for entering the glacial areas of abstract music theory as a pedestrian in a summer suit is prepared to undertake an expedition to the North Pole. Dissatisfied, even disgusted with myself, I shall break off the attempt to find a general solution to the problem of the haunting melody. I have been too ambitious. (Reik 1953, 250)

For Lacoue-Labarthe, this "theoretical 'failure' is also a 'success'," because it keeps intact the "inhibition" or retreat so characteristic of the concept of sobriety that we discussed earlier (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 167). The paradox of mimesis is kept in place: the phenomenon of *émoi* has not swept Reik off his feet, he did not allow it to become his theoretical fixation or obsession. The undecidability and sense of untraceable nothingness at the heart of the unconscious effects of certain emotions, explored through the singing of a haunting melody, became so daunting that he had to withdraw and append his final conclusion on the matter. As a theorist, he acknowledged that there must be a limit to one's desire to assimilate with and thereby stabilise the subject of one's affection; one must acknowledge the difference manifest in one's inquiry.

What is imperative is Reik's "sober" gesture of including the weakening of his theoretical abilities in his book. Reik writes: "Emerging from those haunted grounds and arriving at the end of this study, I suddenly remember that I often daydreamed that it would become a 'great' book. It became nothing of the kind."' (Reik 1953, 376). This exhibition and exposition of failure allows the reader to establish by themselves how *émoi* is mimetically implicated in Reik's discussion on the haunted melody. In other words, Reik, the author, is not an illuminated expert who possesses his subject. Rather, he allows the subject matter to enter his writing practice without deciding on its effects in advance, which draws the reader into the mimetic equation; not through specialised persuasion but with intellectual caution and resilience respecting the affective nature of *émoi* in which Reik is in spite himself implicated. The paradox Reik is subjected to is hereby not resolved as he displays the coincidence of opposites (attraction/rejection, physical agony/a clear mind, submission/distance).

Reik's sobriety aligns with the kind of collapse of the subject that we analysed with respect to Hölderlin. Hölderlin could not coincide with the original intention of the works of the Greeks (in the way his romantic peers had envisaged it), because he felt disabled in the face of recreating that "truthfully." Again, the notion of paradox is at the centre of the problematic. The self-loss implicated in the experience of *l'émoi*, is not that of self-abandonment, in which one is enveloped in the emotion to such an extent that one forgets about oneself. Instead, *l'émoi* implicates the realisation that there is nothing original about the self, the affects it is moved by, or the knowledge that it possesses. This creates a feeling of discomfort because, at the same time, one must acknowledge that one cannot escape oneself: one is inevitably the subject of ("unconscious" or "general" as Lacoue-Labarthe would say) these mimetic processes. In the face of *l'émoi*, then, the subject is folded back on itself. One must attest to and take responsibility for the self in the knowledge that there is nothing that can be called original or authentic in relation to that self.

Always hesitant to present the reader with one-dimensional definitions, Lacoue-Labarthe will also resist putting *émoi* in an easily graspable "category" of experience. One has the feeling that *émoi* precedes experience. It is what problematises the subject's continuous stream of consciousness from the start, an underlying "weakening" process of subject formation, as Lacoue-Labarthe suggests falteringly in one of his "Phrases," in a response to Blanchot's "Un scène primitive" (1976):

> In any case, the lapse occurred before… unnarratable, unavowable, unforgettable. But I'd also add: the worst thing about it was the infinitesimal worsening of everything. The deterioration, yes, and the weakening. (Lacoue-Labarthe 2018, 29)

With the help of Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of *émoi*, we have now established how affectivity is build-in the mimetic procedures of subject formation. We understand that, for Lacoue-Labarthe, it is categorical to distinguish between mimetic identification in terms of "hysterisation," on the one hand, and mimetic affectivity in terms of sobriety, on the other. In

Opelz's words, we must adhere to the etymological meaning of *émoi* to do justice to its subtle use in Lacoue-Labarthe: "the word might be said to designate a mode of inspiration without pathos," to which one must immediately add that inspiration is to be apprehended in connection to the notions of "*détérioration* (deterioration), *dégradation* (degradation), *affaiblissement* (weakening), *défaillance* (failing), *déchéance* (decay)." (Lacoue-Labarthe 2015, xi)

The reason why we took a detour via *émoi*, and its implication for the status of the subject, is because it is a necessary background for understanding Lacoue-Labarthe's account of theatre. As I have suggested before, the actor is Lacoue-Labarthe's entrance into the theatre. To be more precise, it is the speaking or singing actor:

> Theatre – that's what I learned to love and that I now love passionately, wherever it is - happens with the actor, who has a certain voice, a certain text, whatever it may be, and that's what really makes theatre. (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 164)

Lacoue-Labarthe is interested in the actor insofar as it is a subject with a voice. Now, this might come as a surprise because, as I have alluded to before, Lacoue-Labarthe often prioritises the words "mime" and "miming" over "actor" or "performer" and "acting," because the latter notions are so closely linked to acting as the representation of a pre-written text or script. So how to account for this apparent contradiction? In which sense must we understand the essence of the performer on stage as a speaking and/or singing subject while calling that same performer a mime, a figure who is known to be mute? This is where our analysis of *l'émoi* and our detour via music and the haunting melody will be helpful.

For Lacoue-Labarthe, the actor on stage can present — show, exhibit, expose — the human subject in that precarious "unconscious" or "general" mimetic state right before speaking or singing: a figuration of the self before it has been stabilised in one particular figure or form. The moment of singing a haunting melody, for example, as we saw in Reik, is a moment of being affectionately captured by something that fundamentally comes from elsewhere but that is nevertheless produced by and through you. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this is the modality of the actor *always* and *all the time* on stage, irrespective of the nature of the performance. This figuration of the dispossessed self is the axis around which theatre — via the actor's mediation —"happens". Let us look a bit more closely at Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of the use of voice and the status of the subject to clarify this paradoxical, mimetic state of the actor as mime.

5.3 Mime & the Voice

In *Le chant des muses* (2005), Lacoue-Labarthe argues that human beings are inclined towards musicality and melody when using language, even before the need to utter sentences that pertain to a language that can be socially understood.[84] In *La véridiction* (2011), Bailly explains Lacoue-Labarthe's thesis on music and subject formation, which points at the primordial and goes back to the earliest stages of childhood:

> This thesis [on music] is as much a thesis on language because what is posited is that music is heard in man as what he first heard in himself. It is, and here we are right in the aporetic node [*le nœud aporétique*] of what concerns Rousseau, what makes it *natural* to man. Now, this music that man has first heard, is in him the music of language. Language, which Lacoue wanted to remind us was the very first technique [*technè*], is at the same time prior, in each of us, to any acquisition: if, like any technique, it is learned, at the same time it is given to us, and the same thing can be said of song. Now this language which is in us the song of language, on the one hand it comes to us from very far away – it is the obscure dictation [*l'obscure dictée*] that the child hears in the mother's womb before it is even born, it is also the linguistic rumour [*la rumeur langagière*] that surrounds and even envelops the new-born child – and on the other hand we imitate it as soon as we can. Lacoue says that the babbling of a small child is an attempt at phrasing and therefore, even if it does not carry any meaning, it is already a phrasing. 'But this phrasing with which one begins to speak,' he writes, 'is essentially musical' (Lacoue-Labarthe 2005, 27). And of the voice, which 'serves to make the language sing, to make it resonate,' he adds that it is there first of all to help us find the melody. (Bailly 2011, 40–41; my translation)

There are three important elements in this passage that I want to shed light on. In general, Lacoue-Labarthe aims at a decentralisation of the subject in terms of its claim to a universalising *logos*. He understands that by prioritising voice and speech in relation to the human subject, he is dealing with a long history of Western metaphysics in which certain unified and one-dimensional notions of truth, meaning, and objectivity have been implicated in a conception of the rational Subject. Now, instead of saying that human beings have an intuitive relation to meaning and truth because (in contrast to other animals) human beings possess language, Lacoue-Labarthe instead argues that music and melody are natural to human beings. It is our natural disposition to be inclined towards melody, rhythm and musicality when using our voice. This in turn endows us with the necessary tools (*technè*) to use sounds, words, and sentences, but this is not at all the same as saying that uttering (or even thinking about) words secures and grounds our innate grasping of meaning and truth. In fact, that musical inclination might trouble the stabilisation of language even before the subject has uttered a full sentence.

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[84] Cf. Adriana Cavarero, "The Envied Muse: Plato Versus Homer," in *Cultivating the Muse: Struggles for Power and Inspiration in Classical Literature* (2002).

In addition to this first element — that our relation to language is preceded by a natural inclination towards music — Bailly presents another crucial Lacoue-Labarthean insight, which is the intricate relation between "nature" and "technique" (*techné*). This connection combines the Aristotelean notion of art, Diderot's account of the distanced actor and Lacoue-Labarthe's general critique (or deconstruction) of the conception of nature in German romanticism. In short, Lacoue-Labarthe wants to, in line with Diderot, problematise the romantic notion of the "natural" as something that is automatically good, positive, and trustworthy. Our inclination towards melody and music, however intuitive and spontaneous that might be, is not giving us the full picture respecting the mimetic techniques that are implemented in the human relationship with music and sound. It is as fundamental to say that human beings *do* something with what affects them on a pre-reflective, sonorous level as saying that music comes natural to us. It is precisely with respect to the act of *doing*, of *techné*, that the person of the actor comes into the picture. Like no other kind of subject, the actor personifies this double mimetic inclination towards making sound: 1) they allow words and sounds to go through them; sounds that come to them "from very far away" and yet "pass through" them, and 2) the acknowledgement that the actor configures those sounds in a way that is irreversible and singular. So even though the actor's use of voice is natural, it is at the same time distanced, even alienated, from the sounds it produces.

This brings me to the third point: Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of the "phrase". Bailly explains how Lacoue-Labarthe conceptualises the babbling of a small child as a kind of phrasing. Phrasing is an experimentation with and searching for melody in the making of sound. This primordial expedition with voice is not completely random: the child is trying to capture melodies, rhythms, or patterns that they have heard before. These are obviously not yet of the order of knowledge and meaning. Nevertheless, they have left a trace, an imprint or impression (as Plato would say) on the child's soul or nature. From now on, the child will repeat or imitate these phrases for as long as it takes to finally understand them. Now, Lacoue-Labarthe's argument is that when the child has grown up, that initial search for melody will not fade away but will keep underpinning and insisting on their use of voice and speech for the rest of their lives. It is the phenomenon of phrasing and its tendency towards the melodic around which our "procedures" of language and sound gravitates, irrespective of the content.

In this light, we can better understand why Lacoue-Labarthe prefers to speak of the mime rather than of the actor. He wants to emphasise that what is fundamental to the subject in general is not the possession of language and authority in relation to meaning, but rather the primary, natural attempt at phrasing. Phrasing connects more to the act of miming because it is focused on the *doing* of sound (which precedes and configures the subject) and not on the *use* of sound to represent meaning (which comes after the stabilisation of the subject). This is comparable to the doing of any other action, for instance a physical movement that has that same tentative, experimental, and searching quality. To be sure, the notion of phrasing does not exclude meaning. It is not about a performer being deliberately unintelligible on stage, for example. Lacoue-Labarthe just wants to emphasise with the notion of the phrase that meaning is something that rather unpredictably occurs in that infinite "passing though" of words/songs/sentences by the performer, rather than a pre-packaged message with a meaning that is transferred from performer to audience or reader.

This has implications for the theatrical scene as Lacoue-Labarthe envisions it. Considering our discussion on the mode of sobriety, and the notions of "émoi" and the "phrase" in the context of the mime, we can extract a kind of theatre or even art. In Bailly's description it sounds particularly close to deconstruction and Derrida's account of Mallarmé's mime: theatre and the art of the actor is "what has not yet arrived." Again, referring to the status of the mime's use of voice, Bailly explains:

> [It] also means that diction, however great the actor's art, only becomes truly great or, more precisely, right – and this is the point of the tribute to Philippe Clévenot – if the art is forgotten: not so much 'outdated' as, in a way, not yet present.[85] (Bailly 2011, 41–42)

I will not enter Derrida's general critique of the metaphysics of presence here again (which is obviously present in the passage above). Nonetheless, it is Derrida's "The Double Session" that comes to mind when reading Bailly's description of the impossibility of the art of the actor. Derrida would call the *doing* of the mime not acting but instead choses the Greek word "mimesthai": "Within the movement of the *mimeisthai*, the relation of the mime to the mimed, of the reproducer to the reproduced, is always a relation to a *past present*. The imitated comes before the imitator." (Derrida 1981a, 190) In other words, all the mime does on stage is pass on what had already occurred or what had already been in place. In this sense, the mime is not singled out as the human protagonist who establishes the stage but rather makes the stage appear as yet to be established. The reason why, for Lacoue-Labarthe, the theatre starts with the mime is because it is through this subjective figuration or materialised matrix that we can acknowledge the theatre for what it is: a display or revelation of mimesis (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 104). Just like the mime who is, as port-parole, the *doing* of representation, the theatre is defined by its exhibiting or exposing techniques and not by the referencing of this or that world as an objective and external entity. In sum, as Hirt aptly put it: "What is on display in the theatre is what is on display, not what is displayed." (2009, 43)

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[85] Philippe Clévenot was a French actor who worked, among other places, at The National Theatre of Strasbourg. He had a role in Sophocles's "Œdipe le tyran," which was produced for the The Avignon Theatre Festival in July 1998. In this production, Lacoue-Labarthe was responsible for the dramaturgy and the French translation of Hölderlin's translation of the original Greek text for the stage. (Lacoue-Labarthe, n.d., 175–77) Lacoue-Labarthe dedicated his book *Poetics of History* (2019b) "to the memory of Philippe Clévenot, actor."

6. *Conclusion*

Via Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstruction of the concept of mimesis in Plato and furthering Derrida's work on the subject of the "mime de rien," we explored the relationship between theatricality, the subject and mimesis. With Lacoue-Labarthe, we established the deeply rooted Platonism (the imprinting of a model on the subject) as well as Aristotelianism (the importance of the notion of *technē*) in several philosophies of mimesis: in Rousseau, Diderot, Hölderlin, among others. Our primary aim was to show that Lacoue-Labarthe invested in the concept of mimesis from the angle of paradox. Moreover, instead of repeating the history of theories of mimesis in terms of their contradictions or either providing a unifying historical account of the concept in Western philosophy, Lacoue-Labarthe argues for the importance of understanding the paradoxes of mimesis as they have been exercised (I am choosing this word to avoid the opposition between theory and practice) by modern thought, specifically German romanticism, and its underlying dialectical logic. Diderot's paradox of the actor served as a matrix text of our analysis as it provided Lacoue-Labarthe with two key insights about mimesis that have structured his thought ever since.

The first is that he rediscovered the importance of theatre for considering the role of mimesis in philosophical thought: one must start with understanding the workings of theatre *first*, and *then* explain the function of mimesis, and not the other way around, where one first takes a theoretical position on the topic of mimesis (good/bad, moral/immoral, productive/passive) and then distil one's notion of theatre based on that. And second, that a paradoxical account of mimesis allows you to understand the complicated tension that philosophers have had with respect to mimesis as a force, what we repeatedly called "general" mimesis or mimetism, which is a mechanism or dynamic that is difficult to (theoretically) stabilise.

By reflecting on his literary practice and work in the theatre, Lacoue-Labarthe discovered a dual, paradoxical attitude in the actor, further analysed in the work of his primary thinkers, namely the coincidence of *resilience* and *affection*. Developing the idea of a sober theatre was an attempt to capture those (seemingly) opposite modalities. This allowed us to counter theatrical mimesis as 1) establishing a relation between mimetic subjects and their histories based on identification and enthusiasm and 2) as a mere corollary of a philosophical-theoretical treatise on the (il)legitimacy of the representation of this or that figure, which is often based on a specular notion of theatrical mimesis, i.e., the theatre as a visual spectacle.

With his focus on the paradoxical nature of the mimetic appearance of the subject, Lacoue-Labarthe has unmasked a deep-rooted association between passivity and mimesis and stripped it of its romantic spectacles. Taking seriously the affective, haunting (as Derrida would say) dimension of repeating histories, stories, and ideas does not relieve anyone of the task of working their own way through his or her materialised difference vis-à-vis those models. It is the actor who served as the ultimate figuration of this practice. Coincidingly, the critical potential of Lacoue-Labarthe's idea of the sober theatre is not necessarily theoretical, rational, and objectifying in nature but rather embedded in a natural disposition (*technè*) to transform or bend mimetic processes into a relationship in which difference rather than identity is the operating principle. The mimetic attitude of sobriety was proposed as one possible figuration in which the subject appeared as exposing and exhibiting its paradoxical entanglement with mimesis, instead of (dialectically) resolving it. We have explored how the binary oppositions of passive vs active, original vs derivative, nature vs *technè*, emotion vs distance, alienation vs possession appear as paradoxical structures to be practiced and endured, and not as opposing terms to be overcome. It is only through recognising that the subject functions as a substitute for mimesis, in all its paradoxical manifestations, that we can learn about its affective, affirmative and technical dimensions.

Countering the idea of the theatre as a place for identification and emotional possession, then, Lacoue-Labarthe's theatre of sobriety celebrates paradox by exposing difference. In and through the actor, a theatre emerges in which the human subject is on display in its affected, alienated, and weakened configuration with respect to its appeal to a universalising logos. As we have seen, neither of these modalities can be reduced to the stable categories of passivity and activity. Instead, they are placed on "another" stage, a stage outside systematic and dualist accounts of being and reality. The sober theatre makes us pause and critically reflect on what we mean by passive and active in the first place.

In the forthcoming chapter, we will elaborate on two insights regarding the relationship between subject formation and mimetism that we, with Lacoue-Labarthe, have established so far. We will further complicate the problematic of paradox by looking at the function of mime in the constitution of sexuate identity and in particular its formative role in women's exploration of the feminine. Like in Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, mimesis is a double concern for Irigaray. It is a medium or strategy to deconstruct Platonic metaphysics and its excesses in the history of the West as regards the dismissal of difference as a qualitative and substantial relation. At the same time, and Irigaray is conceptually closest to Lacoue-Labarthe here, "minor" conceptualisations of the mimetic via the mime are deployed to *affirm* qualifications of difference.

The second insight we take away from our previous analysis is the re-evaluation of difference in the light of the mime's exhibition of paradox. Through Irigaray's feminist perspective, we learn that particularly for women it is not a question of miming or not miming. We see again Lacoue-Labarthe's general account of mimesis come to the fore which constitutes the pre-reflective, affective dimension of mimetically reproducing models. For Irigaray, women cannot but mime the feminine because they are always already affected on a deep level by the projection or imprint of the (masculine) model of "Woman" onto them since birth. Building on Lacoue-Labarthe, we will ask the question how women can exhibit, with its implication of mimetic *technique*, the paradoxes inherent in the generalised mimetic processes women are subjected to and simultaneously transform.

CHAPTER 3

The Feminine Mime

Luce Irigaray on the Difference of and in the Feminine

Elle (est) pur mimétisme.
Luce Irigaray, Speculum

1. *Introduction*

If Lacoue-Labarthe took mimesis to the theatre, Irigaray takes that theatre and places it firmly back into society. What the Platonic tradition deemed a passive theatre, deconstructed by Lacoue-Labarthe, following Diderot, in terms of "hysterisation," is further examined and critiqued by Irigaray. When Lacoue-Labarthe writes in *Typography* that "the two major risks in Platonic mimetism are feminization and madness," he is referring to the gendered features of sensibility, malleability, impropriety, plasticity, organic weakness, hysteria, pathos, "that 'unstable animal', the uterus," and emotional possession that are historically glued to the concept of theatrical mimesis (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 129). In this context, he references Irigaray's philosophical work on the "motif of the specularization of mimesis" in *Speculum* (1974) and her aim to expose and transfigure the logic of mimesis with its endless reproductions of a phantasmatic ideal of Woman (1989, 129).[86] Significant is indeed Irigaray's explicit use of theatrical language, furthering Lacoue-Labarthe's insight that in order to overthrow Platonic mimesis, one must propose, practice and exhibit an "other" stage, theoretically and affectively, to think the importance and irreducibility of difference in this case with respect to the feminine.

Of the three "mothers" of French post-war feminist thought — Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous — Irigaray has invested most in the meaning and function of mimesis with respect to the question of the feminine.[87] Irigaray's philosophical work on "the struggles of women" (she is hesitant to use the word feminism) cannot be understood without taking into account her equivocal attitude towards the concept of mimesis, particularly women's relation to mimicry, its Platonic understanding, and its outgrowths in Western philosophy and society.[88] One might say that her philosophical ambivalence surrounding the concept of mimesis is, from her first publication, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), up to and including *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), the linchpin around which she thinks sexual difference and develops her own conceptual apparatus vis-à-vis the Western philosophical tradition.

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[86] See with respect to the notions of the phantasmatic and improper in Irigaray Penelope Deutscher's essay "Irigaray Anxiety: Luce Irigaray and Her Ethics for Improper Selves" (1996).

Readers familiar with Irigaray's work will undoubtedly know her oft-quoted claim that mimicry is the only "way out" of a phallocentric (male-centred) language for women (Irigaray 1985, 76–77). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she writes: "one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it." (1985, 76) Instead of just *being* a woman, she must *play* the Woman's part and sabotage it from within.[89] Irigaray's understanding of sabotage is strongly linked to deconstruction and the French philosophies of difference: to "overcome" a Platonic dualism in thought, one must actively avoid a reactionary attitude of pure negation. (This could entail for instance dismissing that you are a woman because you do not want to be equated with what a masculine discourse has determined to be a woman.) It is better instead to make explicit the — in this case, mimetic — regimes of which one is already a part and then, in a second movement (though they are not separate, and one should not be thought before the other) to neutralise the false (i.e., fictionalised) oppositions, contradictions, and tautologies in language in the service of an affirmative and active determination of difference in the feminine (Tyson

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[87] Works dealing with feminism and mimicry in Irigaray include but are not limited to Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (2003), which investigates the interplay between gender, *gestus* and theatre performance through Bertold Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*; Ping Xu's "Irigaray's Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism" (1995), which provides a non-essentialist account of sexual difference and the feminine based on Irigaray's "strategic" use of mimicry; Christine Holmlund's "I Love Luce: The Lesbian, Mimesis and Masquerade in Irigaray, Freud, and Mainstream Film" (1989), which deals with Irigaray's reinterpretation of Freud's notion of masquerade in relation to the lesbian personage in mainstream film; and Katarzyna Ojrzyńska's "Defying Maintenance Mimesis: The Case of Somewhere over the Balcony by Charabanc Theatre Company" (2018), Eluned Summers-Bremner's "Reading Irigaray, Dancing" (2000), Susan Kozel's "'The Story Is Told as a History of the Body:' Strategies of Mimesis in the Work of Irigaray and Bausch" (2020), three essays that address the playful and creative potentiality of performative mimesis in theatre and dance practice based on Irigaray's notion of mimicry.

[88] In a 1980 interview, Irigaray talks about the word feminism: "I don't particularly care for the term *feminism*. It is the word by which the social system designates the struggle of women. I am completely willing to abandon this word, namely because it is formed on the same model as the other great words of the culture that oppress us. I prefer to say 'the struggles of women,' which reveals a plural and polymorphous character." (Baruch, Serrano, and Irigaray 1988, 150)

[89] "Woman" (capital W) designates the unity of female characteristics as historically apprehended, perceived, applied, and imagined by a phallocentric discourse.

2018, 89–101). In Irigaray's case, the sabotaging of Woman through mimicry hence necessarily goes hand in hand with sabotaging a conception of mimesis as secondary copying. Viewed in this way, Irigaray can argue that the mimetic reversal from a subordinate to an affirmative role of women in society implicates not only a liberation for the individual but also, and even more importantly, the transformation of a particular, dominant use of reason and language, which, according to Irigaray, has historically assumed the neutrality of a masculine nature and a masculine morphology.[90]

The idea of mimetic reversal, where women's mimicry becomes the place of conversion from the *reproduction* of Woman to the *production* of the feminine, allowing for its heterogeneous, hybrid, and fluid affirmation instead, is based on Irigaray's dual interpretation of mimesis in Plato. In the questions-and-answers section in *This Sex Which is Not One*, she writes that

> in Plato, there are two mimeses. To simplify: there is mimesis as production, which would lie more in the realm of music, and there is the mimesis that would be already caught up in a process of imitation, specularization, adequation, and reproduction. (Irigaray 1985, 131)

Contrary to most interpretations of mimesis in Plato, but fully in line with Derrida's and Lacoue-Labarthe's exploration of the ancient *mimesthai*, Irigaray suggests that Plato's understanding of the concept of mimesis is not restricted to reproduction but also amounts to productive practices, like music.[91] This insight is significant for several reasons not the least because it reveals how Irigaray reads Plato. Her genealogical approach allows her to work with and against the reproductive and productive conceptions of mimesis in Plato, using elements from Plato's philosophy such as the use of myth to dissect concealed layers in his writing. Some of Plato's conceptual groundwork is hence implicated in Irigaray's evocation of a productive mimesis of the feminine, which is our basis for an exploration of the *feminine mime*.

Another word for women's productive mimesis is the affirmation of a *parler-femme*, a *philosophie féminine*. This is a complex notion because at first glance it seems to suggest the constitution of a language that would be exclusive for women, an instrument of thought that would be innate to only one half of the population and hence not accessible to those not included in the category of Woman. Irigaray has an explicitly non-essentialist conception in mind, however. There is a good, conceptual reason why she does not take the — obvious — route of negating the idea of a feminine language: if you object to the idea of a *parler-femme* because you are afraid to fall into a form of metaphysical essentialism, you have in fact already agreed on an assumed dualistic account of sexual difference. You have agreed on the idea that "woman" and "man" are two categories that are ontologically separate and that it is this original dualism that informs your understanding of the terms of woman and man and apply the notion of language accordingly. It is only on this account that a *parler-femme* might sound essentialist and ontologically exclusive. But taking her cues from French, post-structuralist accounts of the subject, Irigaray would never (at least not in her early work) comply to such a metaphysical claim. The point is to start from a deconstruction of what we mean by woman and man in the first place. Hence, Irigaray's *parler-femme* short-circuits the question of essentialism by absorbing associated biases in language and to convert their significance through a discursive rewriting. A *parler-femme* has an involuntary mimicry of a dominant, masculine language predicated on an attitude of sexual indifference imprinted in it, which is unfortunate but unavoidable: "In a first phase, there is perhaps only one path, and in any case it is the one to which the female condition is assigned: that of mimicry." (Irigaray 1985, 151)

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[90] Morphology is the study of the form of things. It can refer both to the form of structures in biological organisms as to the form of structures in language. Morphology plays a central role in Irigaray's philosophy of the body and is based on the idea that sexuate being penetrates one's existence. When Irigaray speaks of masculine and feminine morphology, she speaks of the body not primarily in anatomical terms (i.e., as "pure biology") but rather as "constituted through linguistic and cultural meanings." (Lehtinen 2015, 8) This is why, for Irigaray, "discourse" is never solely linguistic but always also physical and, in this specific sense, sexuate-oriented.

[91] It is relevant to note that Lacoue-Labarthe's investigation into a generalised mimesis also featured music. He frequently contextualised the mimetic interplay between philosophical writing and fiction/poetry, and his "fictioning" account of the subject, through musical case studies. For example, in *Musica Ficta: Figures of Wagner* (1994) or in "The Echo of The Subject," in *Typography* (1989, 139–207), in which he examined the role of rhythm in the musical obsessions as experienced by the German psychoanalyst Theodor Reik. A lesser known texts on music but relevant within the context of Greek mythology and the Greek notion of *mousikē*, is Lacoue-Labarthe's *Le chant des muses : petite conférence sur la musique* (2005).

It should be noted that Irigaray's conception of a *parler-femme* as women's tool to claim their own language and imaginary, that is, to exercise, exploit and push the unified category of Woman to the limit of its linguistic, material and social function on women's own terms, caused great controversy in the late 1970s and 1980s, mainly in feminist Anglophone circles.[92] The most common criticism levelled at Irigaray at the time was that the idea of a *parler-femme* as a subversive mimicry of the feminine, is based on an essentialist account of the female sex. I have already showed that this is not necessarily the case, but for the sake of clarity it is important to understand the pushback from the corner of feminist studies against Irigaray.

According to Irigaray's critics, Irigaray's (assumed) metaphysical essentialism entailed roughly two problems. Firstly, Irigaray's concept of *parler-femme* and her affirmation of Woman as women's only "path" in life, suggests that all women share the same characteristics. According to this critique, Irigaray defends the position, like some others in the feminist tradition, that being a woman entails meeting certain essential criteria that are predetermined (whether they are of a biological, metaphysical and/or psychological origin). Essence is understood here as a single, stable core or a unity of features that are atemporal, solid and spontaneously grasped by everyone as the same "once-and-for-all" (Lehtinen 2015, 7). The consequence of essentialising women's being in this way is that one can only account for women's experiences (whether they are life-affirming or oppressive) as the product of an ontological structure that precedes — and hence resides "above" or "outside" — the political and/or cultural sphere. Moreover, because of Irigaray's (assumed) lack of exploring the different instantiations of Woman's essence, she seems to insinuate that there are no physical and/or psychic differentiations among women. In short, she is said to understand Woman as representing an internally unified, homogenized group of individuals, thereby falling prey to the mimetic sameness she critiques.

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[92] Classic critiques, directed at Irigaray's alleged metaphysical essentialism, include T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985, 139–47); M. Plaza, "'Phallomorphic' Power and the Psychology of 'Woman'"; (1980); J. Sayers, *Sexual Contradictions: Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Sayers 1986, 42–47)(Moi 1985, 139–47; Plaza 1980; Sayers 1986, 42–47) and more recently A. Brey, "Not Woman Enough: Irigaray's Culture of Difference" (2001, 314–15).

Secondly, Irigaray, according to critics, describing women based on "universal" or "natural" features corresponding to women's bodies risks repeating certain characteristics that have been, historically, assigned to women *by men*. Traditional roles for women in society, like being a mother, caretaker, nurturer, etc. correspond to a set of "female" characteristics that meet society's standards of the traditional gender divide. Being emotional, irrational, and incapable of transcending and controlling one's bodily and hormonal processes are, according to this model, qualifications that are considered "naturally" belonging to women, i.e., they are inert to women's being. As such, these qualifications could function as the basis for the argument that women simply belong in the domestic sphere. By contrast, men would be "naturally" apt to move and speak in the public domain due to their distinct disposition, which is to be rational, intellectual and spiritual (Lehtinen 2015, 7). Famously, in *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir critiqued this sexual hierarchy based on women's "natural" inferiority, attacking features and phenomena traditionally associated with the feminine and women's "destiny" like "physical weakness," "passivity," and "the 'hysterical' body" (Beauvoir 1993, 349).[93] The reason why critics, most notably Judith Butler, have accused Irigaray of falling back into a biological account of womanhood is because, in her writings, Irigaray often explicitly talks from the viewpoint of Woman and even impersonates, *mimes*, archetypical female figures such as the lover, the mystic and the hysteric, foregrounding their corporeality. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, for example, Irigaray speaks in terms of "*female* sexuality," "*woman* and *her* pleasure," "as for *woman*…," "specifically *female* pleasures," which might give the impression that Irigaray is out to re-establish a female identity rooted in biological and/or anatomical notions of a woman's body. Butler concludes from this that Irigaray takes the "givenness" of a woman's body as an uncritical starting point for thinking sexual difference.

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[93] Nidesh Lawtoo uses the term "mimetic sexism" for assigning these specific "mimetic tendencies" — linked to contagion and sympathy — to women, which is central to the hierarchical logic underlying sexual difference. Lawtoo frames mimetic sexism more generally within the context of his notion of the "mimetic unconscious" in *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (2013).

In retrospect, we can interpret these debates revolving around Irigaray's alleged essentialism as a confusion surrounding her specific understanding and use of mimicry in her writing. One possible rejection of these critiques could be that she uses her impersonating voice (often full of irony) to debunk and ridicule the reasoning behind dominant tropes of Woman with the aim to, through these "false" portrayals, create room for others to see the inevitable ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions at play in the imposed ideal of femininity. This is clearly what is at stake when one reads phrases like "jamming the theoretical machinery," which have a clear Derridean influence (Irigaray 1985, 78). Several scholars have interpreted Irigaray's mimicry indeed as a deconstructive method; Ping Xu (1995, 76–77), Margeret Whitford (1996, 8), and Summers-Bremner (2000, 104), for example.

Other critics accused Irigaray of being too naïve about women's mimicry of the female role as a critical approach to the feminine. Why would the mimicry of an often through-and-through male vision and figuration of Woman's "essence" be subversive, they asked? For our analysis, it is interesting to point out that Irigaray's critics have a traditional, Platonic definition of mimesis in mind here. As we have well established in previous chapters, they make use of Plato's concept of mimesis as discussed in book 10 of the *Republic*, which amounts to secondary copying. This conceptualisation of mimesis is to be viewed against the background of Plato's doctrine of Ideas and entails a *reproduction* of qualities. Mimesis in terms of imitation involves copying or duplicating characteristics, nothing more and nothing less. This Platonic account of mimesis is not creative or productive in the sense that it produces anything else but the model's pregiven, essential features. Take, for example, Plato's explanation of the imitative craft of the potter in the *Sophist.* A potter is a good imitator if he equals the universally valid, i.e., "essential" shape of a pot. The point of the potter's imitation is that the essence of the pot remains intact. The link with what is essential about a pot is the only validation of the potter's imitation.

By analogy, when women mimic stereotypical and clichéd expressions of "being a woman" (in language, gesture, art, clothing, etc.), they do not denounce or add anything to the implicitly reductionist, misogynistic and sexist undertones of those expressions, but precisely repeat and confirm them. More so, by setting a specific, "essentially" feminine language as the new norm, women only reverse the power balance without adding to or transforming the hierarchical order underlying the traditional binary model. What is more, Irigaray's mimetic strategy leaves the question what "is," "truly," "essentially" "female" (granted that there is such a thing as a female essence) entirely untouched, which, according to Irigaray's critics, was the very point of contention within the women's movement.

Already since the 1980s, commentators have formulated sustained critiques of these (Anglophone) readings of Irigaray's work, emphasising the importance of reading Irigaray within the larger context of 20th-century French philosophy. Gayatri Spivak, for example, objects against reading Irigaray on purely theoretical grounds:

> I like reading Irigaray, but I read her within the general tradition of French experimental writing, foregrounding rhetoric. It is only if she is read as the pure theoretical prose of truth—whatever that may be—that she may seem essentialist when she talks about women. (Spivak 1993, 19)

Elisabeth Grosz, too, rejects the claim — made by Toril Moi (1985) — that Irigaray's notion of mimesis derives from a "theory of woman" based on women's essential features rooted in anatomy (Grosz 1989, 112–13). Grosz interprets Irigaray's references to Woman, the feminine and *parler-femme* as *strategic* essentialism.[94] Irigaray's ironic use of language reveals a form of rebellious mimesis intended to strategically destabilise a female essence by "passing through" essentialism, so to speak. In the same vein, Diana Fuss argued that

> 'Irigaray both is and is not an essentialist,' because there is a 'double gesture' toward essentialism in Irigaray which is characterized by 'both constructing and deconstructing their [women's] identities, their essences, simultaneously.' (Fuss 1989, 70; Xu 1995, 77)

These scholars focus on the nature of Irigaray's writing, which is, according to them, deliberately equivocal. They argue hence that reading Irigaray requires having a certain sensibility as regards her evocative writing about women, which means not simply taking her provocative statements at face value. Nonetheless, it does add a complication to the task at hand. To provide a lucid explanation of the role of non-representational mimesis in Irigaray's work, one ought to discover in and through her equivocal writing the appropriate tools to grasp and evaluate (the possibility of) her *theoretical* understanding of a subversive and productive account of mimesis as regards the question of the sexuate subject, which is for Irigaray inherently related to an ethics of sexual difference.

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[94] Spivak introduced the phrase "strategic essentialism," see "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography?" in *The Spivak Reader* (1996). On the origins of the term see also Elisabeth Eide's "Strategic Essentialism" (2016). Spivak's own "strategic essentialism" in postcolonial theory might have been indebted to Luce Irigaray.

I agree with the commentators above that these two layers — the (strategically rebellious) nature of Irigaray's formulations and her (theoretical) philosophy of sexual difference — are inextricably linked and hence must be considered together when discussing the feminine and the notion of *parler-femme* in Irigaray. However, I only partly subscribe to the notion of mimesis as a strategy. What I want to show in the course of this chapter is that a mimetic description of the feminine can only be creative and productive under the condition of thinking sexuate being as the expression *hybrid* and *fluid* qualities.[95] It is only within the context Irigaray's fluid and hybrid conception of sexuate being via a productive mimesis of the feminine that one can account for new conceptions of difference and hence formulate other models of sexual difference than a dualistic, hierarchical one. So, while Irigaray's interest in mimesis might come across as strategically implemented to destabilise the reader's biases about female identity, theoretically, her account of fluid mimesis and its specific production of difference *implicates* and *makes possible* this strategic writing/reading practice.

My investigation of Irigaray's work with and in mimesis will hence focus on the following questions. What is, for Irigaray, the difference between a reproductive and productive account of mimesis? In which sense does Irigaray's notion of the feminine mirror, or rather, mime the concept of mimesis in its quest for the multiple, fluid and hybrid? My aim is to make plausible the idea that mimesis is not just a strategic tool that is deployed by Irigaray from a philosophical distance, in an objectifying manner. This would be impossible, Irigaray argues, for the simple reason that she is a female philosopher. It would undermine the premise of her philosophical project, namely that mimetic figurations of the feminine must emerge from a language, imaginary and body that is sexuate-specific. In this capacity, Irigaray's work is convincing in its form because it is the exposition of (not a perspective on) the mimetic procedures of a *parler-femme* that has the evocation of the philosophising female figure of Irigaray implicated in it but precisely as a multiplied, hybrid voice.

I will approach this issue by focusing on two mimetic structures in Irigaray's work around which this chapter will gravitate. Following Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, these two structures are understood by Irigaray terminologically as a 'matrix,' that is, they involve two distinct configurations and production processes of language. We will see that Irigaray's interpretation of these two matrices is distinguished by the fact that it also applies to the constitution of bodily processes and the production of images. Her mimetic matrices are for this reason specifically sexuate-oriented. The first mimetic structure we will discuss is that of *symmetry* and builds on Lacoue-Labarthe's definition of restrictive mimesis. Irigaray shows that in the philosophies of Plato and Freud, among others, binaries such as passivity/activity, model/copy, imitator/imitated, matter/form, lack/fulfilment are grouped together without much thought under one specific model, namely a model of self-same or identity. Instead of examining these dichotomies according to the specificity of the difference in question (for example, that the relation between imitator and imitated might be constantly shifting or fluid, which undermine a clear-cut distinction between the two terms), it is taken for granted that these dualities can be brought back under one denominator via a dialectical opposition. This neutralises the principle of difference as such. This is wrong, according to Irigaray, because what exactly happens, for example, in the relationship between imitator and imitated is not ontologically fixed: the materialised processes released in the activity of mimicry are not at all predetermined. The structure of symmetry, in which all oppositional terms are placed on the same plane, also has repercussions for thinking about sexuate difference, she claims. More specifically: the degraded position of women in relation to men, which runs like a red thread through Western history, has been imprinted by this implicit ideal — "stamp" — of symmetry and at the expense of women.

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[95] Fluidity and hybridity are closely related terms in Irigaray's work yet differ in one aspect. Fluidity and hybridity are used by Irigaray to qualify a female morphology: the explanation of the forms, parts and working structures of a female body. This plays out, simultaneously, on a physical, linguistic, and imaginary level. *Fluidity* refers to the morphological notion of fluids. This includes bodily fluids, but also how we, for example, imagine fluids, how we create stories, myths, and symbols around fluids. In addition, it refers to the use, creation, and association of words in relation to fluids. *Hybridity* refers to the idea that a female morphology consists of parts/qualities that can change shape and functionality depending on its relation to others (other bodies, objects, environments…).

The second mimetic structure is diametrically opposed to the mirror logic of symmetry and is therefore aptly called a structure of *dissymmetry* by Irigaray. Although dissymmetry in a sense opposes symmetry, Irigaray subjects this notion to a very specific quality that she derives from a feminine morphology, namely the notion of fluidity. Mimetic fluidity paradoxically arises from symmetrical processes, but qualitatively they overflow binary oppositions and are thus not reducible to them. In Irigaray's philosophy, the notion of fluidity applies to the level of the body, the level of the imaginary and the level of language and constitutes, moreover, how they interrelate. One way to understand the tension between symmetrical and dissymmetrical forces is to zoom in on Irigaray's dramatization of the univocal term Woman in her own writing. Another way is to focus on how Irigaray demonstrates how the fluidity of concepts, images, and biological processes — as a starting point for a feminine interpretation of mimicry — pervert symmetry as a "solid" concept.

2. *Irigaray Through the Looking Glass*

After a brief introduction to the notion of the "Other Woman" and mimesis as play, I will explore the role of mirrors in Irigaray's *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, her two most influential works. The function of mimesis in these writings is to place "mirrors" in the texts of Freud and others to reflect what cannot, conceptually, be captured by their reflective surface. For this, I will use the context of Irigaray's analysis of Lewis Caroll's Alice in her seldom-discussed chapter "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In this chapter, Irigaray rewrites Carroll's story of Alice to place its mirror logic under a magnifying glass. At first glance, it seems as if Carroll's story is based on a logic of reversal: Alice steps through the mirror and finds herself "living backwards." However, nothing is what it seems in the world beyond the Looking Glass as Carroll's interest lies in the processes of *becoming*, rather than in the one-dimensional symbolism of a mere inverse logic. In her rewrite, Irigaray further dramatizes Carroll's language with the aim to push Alice's deviant and misplaced role in the mirror-universe to its limits, and specifically from the point of view of her sexuate identity. Against this background and foreshadowing her critique of phallocentrism in later chapters of *This Sex*, I will show how Irigaray's transfiguration of Alice is a subversion of a phallocentric system according to which Woman as the inverted other (of man) is attributed the place of *lack* within a mimetic model of *symmetry* and *adequation*. To explicate the ontological presupposition of this claim, I will then turn to Plato's mirror analogy in the *Republic*.

2.1 Mimesis, Play & the "Other Woman"

In *This Sex*, Irigaray writes: "Is not the 'first' stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself?" (1985, 77) There are already three notions in this passage (re-producing, nature, giving form), which we have discussed in our previous chapter, more specifically, in relation to Aristotle's definition of mimesis in *Physics*, Book 2. Aristotle explained that mimesis or art is the technical ability to produce and reproduce nature (Aristotle 2005, 122–23; 194a). Here, mimesis has a double function. It entails the (re)productive act as well as the result of that activity. Moreover, according to Aristotle, human mimesis is distinguished from nature in that it can entertain and use specific tools of (re)production, which are not as such given in nature. Therefore, "the arts […] carry things further than Nature can" (Aristotle 2005, 172–73; 199a). Human mimesis makes use of nature while adding a supplementary function to those natural elements. This results in a mimetic act/product [*poiesis*] that involves a fundamental modification of nature. Human mimesis thus contains a supplement — an irreducible outside which makes things never coincide with themselves, as Derrida would argue — that cannot be "translated back" to nature, so to speak. It produces an excess or surplus, in Irigaray's echoing of Derrida, that "is" nothing "in itself." Rather, this excess is the residue of a mimetic interplay between nature and what cannot be reduced to it.

In our previous chapter, we have applied this problematic to Lacoue-Labarthe with respect to his notion of the "disquieting *plasticity*" of "*mimetism*" (1989, 115), which he linked to Diderot's actor. The Diderotian actor can replicate life (restricted mimesis), but for his/her transformations to become poetical and dramatically interesting, he/she must be guided by a model of plasticity. This model allows the actor to exceed or perfect nature (general mimesis). He understands the interplay between actor and his/her model of plasticity (a *poetics* or *fictioning*) as an example of generalised mimesis: it makes explicit the idea that human production (whether it is expressed through language, gesture, image, character) always entails a mobilisation of — a "giving form" to — mimesis, which is an indefinite process.

In *This Sex*, Irigaray reinstates in this double definition of mimesis (reproduction and constant modification) and asks what its implication is with respect to woman's subject position in language. Would it be possible for women to engage in language, appropriate and modify the way in which women are talked about as one and the same? That is, as representing a unified model — "Woman" — that coincides with itself and that corresponds to a shared imaginary and set of properties? According to Irigaray, this is impossible if women were to stay true to their female morphology and imaginary, which is characteristically "not one" (we will come back to this point). A reproductive mimicking of the female position is *not* an appropriation of mimesis but a repetition of a masculine discourse that wants Woman properly defined and stabilised according to an imaginary that is phallocratic in nature; in Whitford's words, this means being yet again "reduced to the quantifying measurements by which she is domesticated in male systems," namely defined as and confined in a closed "container" (Irigaray and Whitford 1996, 260).

To "play with mimesis," then, indicates investment in an "*other woman*" that is "exterior to all these masculine metaphorizations" (Irigaray and Whitford 1996, 29, 76).[96] If we accept a notion of a productive account of materialised mimetism, in line with figures like Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, then this suggests a perversion of a logos, a dominant reasoning, that wants to hold on to Woman's identity and property as defined by historical familiarisations of the feminine. At the same time, the idea of productive mimesis is compatible with an account of the feminine or a female morphology on the grounds that we take the female disposition as our starting point (this refers to anyone who understands themselves as female and applies to themselves ideas about what it means to be female), as analysed *in its mimetic manifestations*.[97] In other words, we are specifically interested in the mimetic ways in which women experiment with and express themselves through notions of the feminine in accordance with and informed by a female genealogy.[98]

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[96] In other words, Woman as constituted within the dominant logos in/of Western history. And Whitford adds an important reflection: "Irigaray is clearly concerned that the interest that contemporary theory displays in the feminine (documented by Alice Jardine in *Gynesis* (1985)), is less an opening to the 'other woman' than a fresh attempt at territorialization of the maternal-feminine body, repeating the familiar gesture of male self-affection. Is the subject's exploration of the feminine a new auto-affection, she asks, or is it perhaps a breach in the self-sufficiency of the subject's logos? The perspective that she offers is that of an other woman […], exterior to all these masculine metaphorizations." (Irigaray and Whitford 1996, 29)

2.2 Crossing Back Through the Mirrors

In the opening chapter of *This Sex*, titled "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side," Irigaray makes her idea of "playful repetition" visible by destabilising the character of Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass* (1985, 76).[99] Famously, in the original tale, Alice fantasises about stepping through the mirror and finding all things ordinary to be the other way around.

> There's the room you can see through the glass—that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way [and] the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way. (L. Carroll 2009, 127)

Once entered into the Looking-glass world, Alice's adventures revolve around what she finds there and how everything is "as different as possible." (L. Carroll 2009, 129) Clearly, different means different from what feels "normal" to Alice (and us readers). In the mirror kingdom, everything is perceived by Alice as a deviation from normality:

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[97] Irigaray's account of female sexual identity (although she would never call it "identity") is based on Lacan's account of sexual difference and includes the notion that our ideas about differences between the sexes (male/female) are incarnated in language. Sexual difference refers hence not to biology but to the interpretation of sexual difference materialized in language. This is not to be conflated with the concept of "gender," (broadly used in Anglo-Saxon scholarship) which is absent in Lacan's and Irigaray's vocabulary. As Stone points out, for Lacan (and Irigaray) sexual difference "blurs the distinction between sex, gender and sexuality." (2008, 119) For a thorough account of Irigaray's embeddedness in Lacan's philosophy, see Stone's chapter "Sexual Difference," in *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy* (2008, 112–39).

[98] On the role of genealogy in feminist theory, see Kathy Ferguson, "Interpretation and Genealogy in Feminism" (1991), regarding the mother-daughter relationship, Alison Stone, "Female Subjectivity and Mother-Daughter Relations" (2011) and Amber Jacobs, "The Potential of Theory: Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship" (2007), regarding divinity, see Irigaray's book *Divine Women* (1986), Penelope Deutscher, "'The Only Diabolical Thing About Women...': Luce Irigaray on Divinity" (1994), Morny Joy, *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion* (2006) and Peta Hinton, "The Divine Horizon: Rethinking Political Community in Luce Irigaray's 'Divine Women'" (2013).

[99] This is the sequel to Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* from 1865.

> The pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be all alive, [also] the very clock on the chimney-piece […] had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her [and] the chessmen were walking about, two and two!" (Carroll 2009, 129)

Material objects are "alive," the reverse of how we would normally perceive objects, namely as mute and inanimate. However, as we will see, the change from a visual representation (the pictures on the wall or the two-dimensional clock) to an impersonated scenery where characters are animated through facial expressions (grinning) and physical enactment (walking about) is not just a matter of reversing the world but signals a much more dislocated logic. From Alice's perspective, the inverted universe is a kind of performance in which she must participate; characters, objects and places have intentions and speak to her in a language she cannot possibly decipher; moreover, they want things from her that she most of the time cannot give. These dramatic situations cause friction in Alice's stability and identity. It is at these unsettling moments in Carroll's narrative that Irigaray steps in and philosophically explores the simulated dimensions of Alice's character.

In Irigaray's "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side," we see that there is indeed something quite different at stake than a mere reversed logic, paying close attention to Carroll's imagery. Through Irigaray's voice (she speaks like a close yet distant friend of Alice, observing her metamorphoses while rewriting her tale) Alice's adventures revolve around the *passage* through the mirror. Carroll already alluded to the quality of the in-between or threshold stage of the passage: it does not provide any clear view on what lies "beyond." When Alice envisages going through the passageway, she says that the "glass has got all soft like gauze," then "turning into a sort of mist […] certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist." (L. Carroll 2009, 128) For Irigaray, these qualifications, the shift from mirror (reflective glass) to fluidity (melted glass), are significant because they symbolise Alice's fundamental inability to articulate the "beyond" from a clear and singular perspective, i.e., as a universe where everything is simply "contrariwise." (L. Carroll 2009, 159, 160, 166, 168). Irigaray argues how the notion of a contrariwise-universe is the equivalent of what she calls a "reverse of the sames." (Irigaray 1993b, 88) The "sames" refers to all the qualifications that are posited according to the same structuring principle as before: that of *identity* or *self-same* from which follows negation, contradiction, opposition, reversal, etc.; the focal point here being the mirror which serves as the imaginary instrument of that logic. The aim of Irigaray's retelling is to show that Alice does *not* become — fall together with — the reverse image of identity as she enters the other side of the mirror. Instead, her journey complicates these dualistic notions (normal/different, self/other), as she turns around and crosses "*back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*." (1985, 77) In Irigaray's universe, Alice's adventures take place on a two-way journey, which gives the reader a significantly different picture of what occurs "beyond" the Looking-glass world.

For Irigaray, dualisms are symbolic of a patriarchal order of "dichotomizing," most prominently between self and other, which relegates women to an object-position (1985, 79).[100] As Irigaray argues several times in her work, the reduction of women to objects is linked to the male desire for possession and *repeats*, *reproduces* (hence its internal mimetic logic) man's relation to the world as fully enveloped in its own phantasmatic order. To the extent that female characteristics, creative explorations of the feminine and women's desire can be neutralized in favour of the male phantasmatic ideal of affirming and reproducing its own identity and sexual desire, Woman has become a commodity that can be capitalised and traded without much internal logical contradiction. The reason why, for Irigaray, being perceived as objects to be possessed is problematic for women is because it means that, on all fronts, they must live in accordance with a male imaginary and logos. In other words, they are required to live in a "phantasmatic dream" that is fundamentally not theirs. And this is not resolved by simply reversing the object/subject position. The issue is not for women to be an object or not but the fact that the assumed dualistic account of subject and object, self and other, is constituted according to what we called above a phantasmatic reverse of sames and what Irigaray has elsewhere (in *Speculum*) coined the "Old Dream of Symmetry," which reflects a –– historically — male design of reason and language (Irigaray 2010, 11–24).

The "old dream of symmetry" is symbolic of an order in which the notion of Woman and the feminine can only be accounted for as the "other" within a male-centred imaginary. Reflecting on this problematic — analysed in detail in the works of Freud and Plato in *Speculum* and already extensively discussed in Irigaray studies — Irigaray writes:

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[100] As becomes clear in Irigaray's critical yet charitable interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy in *Marine Lover* (1993b), positing Woman as the object of a specularised reasoning or mirroring goes hand in hand with the desire to *possess*, which, in turn, becomes the measure of value. To illustrate and strengthen her argument, Irigaray cites from a posthumous fragment of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: "To compose oneself an object to suit one's fantasy and believe henceforth that one would possess it wholly as the lover does with his beloved, the father with the child: what joy than in possessing! —but here it is the appearance that suffices us. We imagine the objects *that we can attain* in such a way that their possession seems most valuable to us. (Irigaray 1993b, 88–89; Nietzsche 1967, 310; fragment 11:34). Although Irigaray sympathises with Nietzsche's obvious ironic tone, she argues that he cannot fully distance himself from the underlying subject/object power dynamic that he pokes fun of.

> The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in knowledge. That they do not claim to be rivalling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos. They should not put it, then, in the form 'What is woman?' but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (1985, 78)

A couple of conceptions in the above passage are centralised, or dramatized rather, in Irigaray's retelling of Alice. She problematises the passageway of the mirror by using Alice's role within the given order as the display of precisely this "disruptive excess." How? Irigaray's imperative to avoid the question 'What is woman,' is reflected in the way she redoubles Carroll's references to Alice's duplicitous identity, problematising not only the identity of Alice but also her own identity as a female writer and philosopher. In her narration, Alice and Irigaray become each other's double but without being reducible to one another, i.e., without their identities being reversable: "'What did she do next?' She is not I. But I'd like to be 'she' for you. Taking a detour by way of her, perhaps I'll discover at last what 'I' could be," as if finding their only point of reference in the other's image, but also exceeding that image by overflowing in the other (Irigaray 1985, 17–18).

There is another striking example where identities are not doubled but *dissolved*: now it is the evaporation of names that becomes Irigaray's gateway to disturb the binary order. In Carroll's tale, Alice at some point arrives in the forest, where things slowly start to lose their names, to which Alice responds with a fearful "Who am I, then?" (L. Carroll 2009, 19).[101] Slowly loosing grip on her own name, Alice realises that she does not, as a unified entity, relate to herself in an intuitive, direct way. She only sees "herself" reflected through a mirror palace of characters. This is again put under a magnifying glass by Irigaray as she exposes the explicit sexuate undercurrent of those qualified characteristics: "she" becomes the figuration of the "one" desired, feared, violated, violating, loved, abandoned, carefully curated, exchanged… But excesses appear in the cracks in between those roles, in the "passage," through Irigaray's carefully curated adjustments of the tale. Irigaray adds qualities that are specifically "not one". By leaving behind "her" name, Alice now becomes a multiplied voice that swiftly moves from male (“Lucien,” “Leon”), to female (Alice), to all “in-betweens” (“mother-Alice,” “Lucien-Gladys,” “Alice-her friend,” “tall-short”) (1985, 11). Thus, Irigaray characterising Alice as she works her way through (t)his kingdom, Alice is constantly negotiating multiple identities in which she sometimes gets stuck or otherwise finds lucid moments of reflection:

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[101] Irigaray uses this phrase as an epigraph to "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side": "... she suddenly began again." Then it really *has* happened, after all! And now, who am I? I *will* remember, if I can! I'm determined to do it!" But being determined didn't help her much, and all she could say, after a great deal of puzzling, was: "L, I *know* it begins with L." (Irigaray 1985, 7)

> How can I be distinguished from her? Only if I keep on pushing through to the other side, if I’m always beyond, because on this side of the screen of their projections, on this plane of their representations, I can’t live. I’m stuck, paralyzed by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen. (1985, 17)

These Irigarayan passages are important to understand the fundamental difficulty of Alice, as a young girl, to live through these series of alienations. In Carroll’s tale, these are expressed through the frequent use of mirrors, echoes, scenes, doublings and repetitions, a labyrinth of contradictory logics from which Alice cannot escape. What is foregrounded in Irigaray’s retelling, is that this “imprisonment” is irrevocably connected to her sex, i.e., it matters that Alice is a girl. In other words, she expands Carroll’s imagery of mimetic doublings to express the so-called phallocratic imprisonment in which women and young girls are stuck. On the one hand, Alice is forced into Woman’s position and required to take on that identity, while, at the same time, in reality, she is reflected as a dispersed, ungrounded figure “beyond” basic comprehension, both with respect to the world around her as well as herself as an individual. Her forced mimicking is “his specular imprisonment” (referring again to a male-centred or phallocratic discourse and imaginary) (Irigaray 2010, 137).

Nonetheless, on another plane, that of Irigaray’s characterisation of Alice, Alice’s sexual identity and personhood *are* somehow freed from imprisonment. Its productive potential lies in Irigaray’s discursive rewriting, where space is created for the reader to be confused by Alice’s sexuate identity, inviting him or her to ask questions about what Alice’s role is at *this* moment, in *this* situation, and without reducing her to a one-dimensional image. Irigaray refuses to settle the reader with a comfortable image of Alice as she is confronted with the entanglement of identity and violence (“*With her violet, violated eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognize the right side, the wrong side, and the other side: the blur of deformation; the black or white of a loss of identity*” (1985, 10)), a troubled mother-daughter relationship (“*Alice is at school. She’ll come back for tea, which she always takes by herself. At least that’s what her mother claims. And she’s the only one who seems to know who Alice is*” (1985, 10) and, finally, the embarrassment of not being recognised by her lover as the disassembled mess that she is (“*Does he begin to harbor a vague suspicion that she is not simply herself? He looks for a light. To hide his confusion, fill in the ambiguity. Distract her by smoking. She doesn’t see the lighter, even though it’s right in front of her*” (1985, 11).

His "suspicion" that she might not be "herself" is symbolic (and ironic) of the *dissymmetrical* relation that Alice has to identity (personal identity as well as sexual identity). Alice is constantly asked by other characters to assume her identity, to be recognisable as such, i.e., to play her part (as a girl, virgin, lover, mother, wife, etc.). From Alice's perspective, this means that she must negate not necessarily her "original" or "true" self (who would that be?) but the *fluid* and *disturbing* quality of the imitations that she is caught up in. She must cover over that her imitations of Woman are doomed to fail, that she is bad at it, that she cannot keep up, and most of all, that the very premise of this enterprise is, objectively speaking, upsetting. As Irigaray explains a little further in *This Sex*, in "The Mechanics of Fluids," residue qualities of fluidity, dissonance, and dissimilarity produced by women's mimicry, lie "beyond" the given order. They are not recognised and registered by those who think and speak within the dominant (masculine) discourse. Her imitations must be "solid": a perfect semblance between copy and original as to not destabilise the formal order (Irigaray 1985, 111).[102]

Irigaray also makes a symbolic connection between women's fluidity in language and the quality of "real" (bodily) "fluids," which are similarly repressed because posited by the given order as "outside" comprehension. Conveniently, they are "given over to God":

> All of which have excluded from their mode of symbolization *certain properties of real fluids*. What is left uninterpreted in the economy of fluids—the resistances brought to bear upon solids, for example—is in the end given over to God. Overlooking the properties of real fluids—internal frictions, pressures, movements, and so on, that is, *their specific dynamics*—leads to giving the real back to God, as only the idealizable characteristics of fluids are included in their mathematicization. (Irigaray 1985, 109)

We will come back to the production and affirmation of fluids, "*their specific dynamics*" in the second part of this chapter. To return to and conclude our reading of Alice, what we see in Irigaray's story is the Looking-Glass House reflecting the (masculine) assumption that Alice can under no circumstance break through those mirrors and start reflecting what falls outside of that speculative and specularising order. And if she does transgress, it is her own fault if she is misunderstood. Irigaray's text shows that although Alice might not be able to step outside the mirror, she is nevertheless, through Irigaray's text, stepping *back* through that mirror, thereby displaying the discontinuities and contradictions at play in the desire to capture and possess Alice within the accepted (masculine) order. Because Irigaray's text, from all perspectives in the story — yet always foregrounding Alice's shifting roles — borders on the ridiculous and painful, it is the Looking-Glass House itself, with its underlying logic of the same, that loses its legitimacy and appears as nothing more than painful joke. Rather than demonstrating how Alice "resists" imitating the roles of Woman, from a stable centre and sure of herself, Irigaray choses to keep her in that vulnerable and precarious position. She purposefully resists to make of Alice a heroine who "takes on the patriarchy, all on her own," so to speak. Alice is not a heroine; she does not "overcome" (in terms of reversing) the power dynamic because from her position she genuinely cannot. That would be unrealistic. What Irigaray has created instead is a context — a new stage — in which Alice's vulnerability and precariousness become painful and embarrassing. As readers we are complicit in Alice's confusions (remember that all her endeavours take place in the "passageway" through the mirror where everything remains blurry) and fundamental inability to make something of herself in this mirror palace.

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[102] What is hence questioned in Irigaray's exploration of Alice is the notion of the "proper," which is reminiscent of Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstruction of the subject of mimesis: in so far as every subject is mimetic, and every mimetic act is the display of the subject as duplicitous, there is an internal schism or duality configuring the self, which subverts any account of the "proper." In Irigaray's sexuate-specific language, her *parler-femme*, the schism is explained more in the direction of a multiplicity or fluidity. Alice is not reducible to one name, because she "is," in Carroll's underground, everywhere all at once: […] except that 'she' never has a 'proper' name, that 'she' is at best 'from wonderland,' even if 'she' has no right to a public existence except in the protective custody of the name of Mister X—then, so that she may be taken, or left, unnamed, forgotten without even having been identified, 'i'—who?—will remain uncapitalized. Let's say: 'Alice' underground." (Irigaray 1985, 21–22)

We have discussed one example in Irigaray's thinking of the complex relationship between the notion of the feminine and mimesis through the literary figure of Alice. We have identified at least two forms of mimesis in Irigaray's "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side." The first corresponds to the image of the mirror: Irigaray presents Alice as a figure who must reflect or mirror the role of the feminine other. In other words, she must incarnate all feminine roles implicated in the umbrella term of Woman. The second mimesis is performed by Irigaray's own staging of Alice: by discursively rewriting Alice's tale, Alice is acknowledged as a subject who — in spite of herself — falls outside the dualistic order, which structures figurations of Woman, in which she seems trapped. In Irigaray's tale, we share in Alice's confusion, anxiety, disillusion, and alienation, which are not signified as expressions of weakness and passivity but rather as persistence. Simultaneously, Irigaray has laid out, reappropriated and reconfigured the "master's tools," which we can now evaluate for what they are; not an objective and universal account of reason and language but the phantasmatic justification of a masculine dream.[103]

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[103] I am alluding to the phrase "[assuming] the master's tools to dismantle the master's house." E.g., Foucault's work in the 1970's, which makes the same gesture as Irigaray regarding the reappropriation of power as the basic condition for turning repressive (societal) elements of power into productive modes of power. See also Audre Lorde's counter-reaction to this idea; "the master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house." (Lorde 1984, 112)), from her essay collection *Sister Outsider* (1984). For a defence of Foucault, against criticisms levelled at him by Lorde and Nancy Fraser, see Jason A. Springs, "'Dismantling the Master's House': Freedom as Ethical Practice in Brandom and Foucault" (2009).

To make intelligible Irigaray's claim that the notion of the feminine is both "trapped" in and "excluded" from a metaphysical mirror-model of reason, as we have suggested above, we must carefully explicate the ontological model of mimesis that she is opposing. Secondly, we must be able to explain how Irigaray can claim that it is *another* model of mimesis (than mirroring or imitation) that somehow makes that mirror model possible, and simultaneously apt to undermine it. I will hence now continue with a critical examination of the mirror metaphor in Plato. I will elaborate on Irigaray's interpretation of the mirror analogy to establish her idea of sexual difference being "passively" constituted, based on the structure of Plato's metaphor. As we shall see, the mirror model of sexual difference (or indifference, rather) refers to the ontological relation between model and copy, which gets equated with the male and female sex retrospectively and is structured around the principle of *symmetry* or *sameness*.

2.3 Plato's Mirror Analogy

In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato investigates, among other things, the nature of images. In relation to the things imitated or depicted, images are mere phantoms or shadows [*eidôla*]. Images originate in appearance rather than reality, a domain characterised by constant flux, illusion, and deception. To advance this idea, Socrates introduces the metaphor of the mirror to explain the work of the craftsman:

> The quickest perhaps is to take a mirror, if you like, and carry it round with you everywhere. In no time you will make a sun and the heavenly bodies, the earth, yourself, and all the other living creatures, objects and plants and everything we've just been talking about.[104] (Plato 2013b, 396–397; 596e)

Socrates argues that the practice of the imitator or craftsman does not amount to much because all he does is, like a mirror, reflect what already exists. Recalling our discussion on Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe on the ancient understanding of the *mimesthai*, Jean-Pierre Vernant similarly argues that with Plato's dialogues of *Republic* book 10, a new conception of mimesis has entered the scene. Where the concept of *mimesthai*, which was dominant prior to Plato, foregrounded the problematic of (non-dualistic and non-representational) impersonation, vivid enactment and exhibition, in Plato's later books of the *Republic*,

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[104] For the function of the mirror in Plato, see also Lacoue-Labarthe's essay "Typography," in *Tyopography* (1989) and Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (1982).

> the accent, on the contrary, is emphatically put on the relationship between the image and the thing of which it is the image, on the relationship of resemblance that joins and yet distinguishes the two. This explicit formulation of the bond of "semblance" that every kind of imitation must activate brings to the fore the problem of the copy and the model and what they are, as much in themselves as in relation to one another. (Vernant 1991, 166)

Plato's mirror metaphor introduces the problematic of the distinction between original and copy. This distinction now becomes central to his notion of mimesis and will be as such applied to the maker—the artist or painter—whose actions are reduced to simple mechanical reproduction:

> The mimetic activity of artists who fashion images is analogous to other phenomena, which, this time, are not products of a human operation but of a divine art—natural phenomena, for example, like reflections in water, figures in mirrors, shadows, and visions in dreams. (Vernant 1991, 166)

Plato shifts mimesis' function from the human ability to assume and produce other identities and to re-enact animal and natural characteristics — phenomena associated with the notions of *mimesthai* and *mimos*, discussed in *Republic*'s earlier books — to the question of divine art as duplication or reflection. For Plato, the painter does not produce, make, or create because his practice is divine manifestation, not the result of human enactment.

This is the reason for Socrates' ironic use of the word "make," when he says "make a sun and the heavenly bodies…" with the help of a mirror. What is implied in Plato's metaphor of the mirror is the false idea that the artist is the author of mimesis and thus responsible for what is produced on the canvas. In the dialogue, Socrates teaches Glaucon, his interlocutor, to reject the idea that what the painter paints has an ontological root in human activity. Because of his central focus on mimesis' copy/original distinction in this dialogue, a metaphysical notion that functions as the precondition for divine art, the painter's artworks are simple copies. In themselves (without clear reference to the original) they can only spread confusion and deception. Even if Glaucon would naively say that the craftsman makes a bed — to use another analogy by Plato — and thus creates a tangible object in that way, he would be led by a false belief. The painter and craftsman never create "the things that are real in the true sense," they only reflect or reproduce "things we can perceive" (Plato 2013b, 396–397; 597a). Apart from the fact that the mirror teaches us about the divine, reproductive function of mimesis, it also illustrates mimesis' inherent deceptive nature. What is repeated in mimesis are the things that we encounter in everyday life, i.e., as we perceive them with our senses, but never in their true being. It is Plato's resilience against the trustworthiness of the senses in *Republic*, book 10, that will structure his distinction between original and copy and hereafter inform his interpretation of mimesis in all its forms.

Following Plato's metaphysics as developed in book 10 of the *Republic*, shadows, reflections, phantoms, and images are intelligible on the condition of what Irigaray calls a model of *symmetry* (Irigaray 2010, 11–129, 243–356).[105] The deceptive, false, misleading, and reproductive qualities of images are established based on their degraded position vis-à-vis the transcendent Platonic Forms of Being and Truth. Being and Truth carry all the qualifications that their shadowy counterparts lack: solidity, autonomy, stability, consistency, self-transparency and self-identity. Phantom-images contradict in their very existence Identity and Being. They fail to reproduce the true being of what they reflect, which indicates their innate duplicitous character. What will be important for Irigaray's analysis is the insight that one can only speak of images, imitations, and copies in terms of lack, failure, and duplicity if one effectively expects those reflections to obey the law of symmetry, that is, to duplicate exactly the model of self-identity and sameness. After all, for Plato, it is because of the metaphysical presupposition of selfsameness that a thing is what it is and not something else.

In *Speculum of The Other Woman* (1974), Irigaray reformulates mimesis' "*axis of symmetry*" through the figure of the square:

> The square is defined only by means of the diagonal that determines that its two halves, or isosceles triangles, are equal. That they can be folded over upon each other, into each other—indefinitely—by a shift around an axis of symmetry. This axis may vary in length, but the crucial thing is that it is not divisible at any point, that no hole can be made in the unity it represents. For this would allow the passage of something, of grater or larger number, power, or extent, in one of the two (sides). (Irigaray 2010, 360)

Applied to the concept of mimesis, the unity of the square amounts to model and copy covering each other completely: folding the square into two halves leaves no "draft strip" or "crooked fold" that could disturb the symmetry between model and copy. We can interpret Irigaray's square, just like Plato's mirror, as a formal illustration of the fact that the copy's function can never diverge from the omnipotence and metaphysically presupposed ideal of selfsameness. Irigaray emphasises that understanding the human activity of mimicking — the broad realm of impersonating, miming, masquerade, dance — based on this model of symmetry, produces a very specific power dynamic between the roles of imitator and imitated. Where in the ancient understanding of *mimesthai* the emphasis was on metamorphosis, a temporal, overall or partial modification of one's nature, Plato's model of the painter in *Republic* book 10 presents a completely different image of the human act of imitation, which is now subjected to the dualistic imitating/imitated dynamic. The imitation must be, as a whole, *equal* to the original, which means to never override or undermine the formal dominance of the model's essence of the Same. The more unity through similarity between imitated and imitator the more the ontological lack on the side of the imitation is affirmed. Based on this mimetic model of the Same, the imitation is lacking in two distinct ways. The imitation is lacking due to its *deviation* from the ideal perfection of the original. And there is the imitation's ontological lack resulting from more accurately *conforming* to the original.

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[105] Irigaray critiques the metaphysical condition of symmetry, firstly, in Freud's thinking ("The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry") in the first part of *Speculum of The Other Woman*. Secondly, she analyses the role of symmetry in Plato's Allegory of the cave ("Plato's *Hystera*") in the third part of *Speculum*. For a contemporary reading of Irigaray's account of Plato's Cave, see (Jones 2011, 38–65).

Now, although this conceptual model is well-known in the history of metaphysics, it is nevertheless crucial to reiterate how Plato's metaphysics of symmetry underlies this specific form of mimesis, because it is precisely against this ideal that Irigaray's entire difference philosophy is directed and, paradoxically, within which she finds new mimetic forms of exposition.

It is also important to understand why Irigaray reframes Plato's reproductive account of mimesis in terms of an "*axis*" of symmetry (Irigaray 1985, 109; 2010, 11–240). She is interested in mimesis insofar as it represents a particular matrix of thought (also defined by her — building on Plato's frequent use of metaphor — as a "*theatrical arena*" (Irigaray 2010, 245)).[106] Reproductive mimesis is used by Irigaray not so much as an aesthetic theory but rather as a formula of thinking that originated in Plato — or, more accurately, Platonic metaphysics — and around which she sees the history of Western language structured and organised ("the world [is] from end to end organized as mimesis; re-semblance is the law" (Irigaray 2010, 149–50)). In more recent works, she suggests that this mimetic model is held in place to defeat the potential "powers" of "light," "transformation" and, as becomes clear in *Between East and West* (2002), "breath," qualifications that she connects to the maternal-feminine.

In any case, this mimesis-matrix of symmetry informs her reading and interpretation of the philosophical notion of difference in the works of a variety of Western thinkers, not just Plato, Freud and Lacan but also philosophers such as Aristotle (1993a, 34–55), Descartes

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[106] The etymology of "matrix" plays an important role in Irigaray's philosophy. The Old French word for matrix is "matrice," meaning "uterus, womb, and directly from Latin mātrix (genitive mātricis) "pregnant animal," in Late Latin "womb," also "source, origin," from māter (genitive mātris) "mother," see https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=matrix. Irigaray uses the term most prominently in her book *Speculum*. For a recent account of the meaning of this etymology in Irigaray's thinking, see "Metaphysical/Metaphorical Recourses," in (Jones 2011) Rosi Braidotti further develops Irigaray's account of sexual difference as a matrix of power, see R. Braidotti, "Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited" (2016, 44–45).

(1993a, 72–82), Spinoza (1993a, 83–96), Merleau-Ponty (1993a, 151–84), Levinas (1993a, 185–217), Kant (2010, 204–5; 1993a, 7, 85), and Hegel (1996, 19–33).[107] She investigates the extent to which their accounts of difference are "sexuate" [*sexué*], even if they assume their language sexuate-neutral. Consistently throughout her work, Irigaray analyses their sexuate *raison-d'être*, moving back-and-forth between Plato's axis of symmetry and her own axis of dissymmetry rooted in a radical ethics of sexual difference.

2.4 Mirrors & Psychoanalysis

Irigaray argues that mimesis' underlying ideal of symmetry is reflected in a specifically masculine language and imaginary, which she sees exemplified in the works of Sigmund Freud and (to a certain extent) Jacques Lacan. Irigaray's complicated relationship with psychoanalysis has been the subject of numerous studies and need not be reiterated in detail here.[108] For our analysis it suffices to highlight two examples. These examples help us to clarify how the position of the feminine is mimetically constituted within a phallocentric model, which accounts for the feminine and women's desire in terms of a double lack. For Irigaray, this double lack is the product of a thinking structured around the idea of reproductivity or Platonic mimesis. More specifically, for Irigaray, it is the axis of Freud's theory of phallus-envy and Lacan's notion of the mirror stage.

The structure of Irigaray's controversial book *Speculum* is already emblematic of this idea.[109] In *Speculum*'s first part, Irigaray critiques Freud's "dream of symmetry." The third part consists of Irigaray's analysis of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which she equally challenges the function of symmetries. And — strategically — in the middle part, titled Speculum, Irigaray places a double-sided mirror between her critical reading of Freud and her analysis of Plato's Cave: she wants to demonstrate how these two texts mirror each other, which is reminiscent of Derrida's deconstructive reading in "The Double Session". However, particular to Irigaray's philosophy is subverting the classic mirror as a flat surface by positing it as a *curved* surface instead.[110] This means that rather than seeing the theories of Plato and Freud perfectly mirrored, we see them curiously modified — think of a laughing mirror that reflects everything in a distorted way. This distortion (and the ridicule and laughter that it can invoke) is necessary, says Irigaray, in order to bring to the surface excesses of the feminine in their writing. But before we go into Irigaray's notion of the bend mirror, i.e., dissymmetry, let us first elaborate on the idea of the flat mirror.

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[107] For Irigarayan interpretations of Descartes's concepts of generosity and wonder, see Anthony David's "Le Doeuff and Irigaray on Descartes" (1997), Marguerite La Caze's "The Encounter Between Wonder and Generosity" (2002) and Perry Zurn's "Wonder and Ecriture: Descartes and Irigaray, Writing at Intervals," in *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray* (2017). On Irigaray's conception of sexual difference through Aristotle's concept of place in *Physics*, see Emanuela Bianchi's *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos* (2014), and specifically in relation to the notions of becoming and interval, Rebecca Hill's *The Interval: Relation and Becoming in Irigaray, Aristotle, and Bergson* (2011).

[108] For Irigaray's philosophical views on psychoanalytic practice and discourse, see, for example, Whitford's *The Irigaray Reader* (1996, 69–153) and van den Ende's *In levende lijven* (1999, 48–108).

[109] *Speculum* led to her "excommunication" from the Freudian School of Paris. She also lost her teaching position at Vincennes (Le Doeuff 2003, 65).

In *This Sex*, Irigaray writes:

> As for the priority of symmetry, it co-relates with that of the *flat mirror* — which may be used for the self-reflection of the masculine subject in language, for its constitution as subject of discourse. Now woman, starting with this flat mirror alone, can only come into being as the inverted other of the masculine subject (his *alter ego*), or as the place of emergence and veiling of the cause of his (phallic) desire, or again as lack, since her sex for the most part—and the historically valorized part—is not subject to specularization. Thus in the advent of a 'feminine' desire, this flat mirror cannot be privileged and symmetry cannot function as it does in the logic and discourse of a masculine subject. (Irigaray 1985, 129)

In Freud, the logic of the flat mirror is at play when he characterises, in his text on "Femininity," the little girl in terms of a little boy (Freud 1978, VI:112–35). In describing the process of the child becoming a woman, Freud explains how the child grows up being the mother's object of desire. The so-called "phallic stage" in Freud's psychoanalytic theory amounts to, in very broad strokes, the following process. In growing up, the child will slowly realise that it is separated from the mother. This separation is experienced by the child as a lack, which it aims to overcome by way of reuniting with the mother. When the child discovers that the mother finds her object of desire elsewhere, the child will symbolise the mother's desired object to compensate for its own lack. The desire for the mother develops into the desire to become the desired object for the mother. In psychoanalytic terms, the child must become the *phallus* for the mother, in which case the phallus stands for the desired object of the mother. It is in this sense and at this stage of the libidinal development of the child, says Freud, that "we are now obliged to recognise that the little girl is a little man." (Freud 1986, 96–97; 1978, VI:118; Irigaray 1985, 34)

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[110] The curved mirror is another word that Irigaray uses for "concave speculum." (Irigaray 2010, 134). A speculum is a device used by doctors for internal examination, like vaginal examination. The duck-bill-shaped instrument opens the walls of the vagina, so that the gynecologist can examine the vagina and cervix. This instrument has two characteristics that are conceptually (and symbolically) important for Irigaray's understanding of mimesis and the feminine. First, the curved shape of the speculum can reflect a woman's "inside," which would remain unseen if one would use a flat mirror. Second, the curved shape of the speculum turns a woman's "inside" "inside-out," so to speak: it lays bare what at first glance remains hidden and imperceptible. Now, these two characteristics allow Irigaray to critique, first and foremost, Freud's understanding of femininity and women's desire as the mirrored, unperceivable other of a masculine model of sexuality and desire. According to Irigaray, Freud illustrates women's desire as (1) unknowable, (2) desiring what a man has (phallus), (3) desiring what a man desires, and (4) if she desires something entirely different then it is either a "phallic" or "masculine" desire, or it is a desire that will also remain unknown to herself (van den Ende 1999, 120–21). These four options fall neatly into the flat mirror logic: a woman's inside is either predicated on what we know as "phallic" desire or as imperceptible and unknowable altogether. In turn, Irigaray uses her "speculum" as a philosophical "instrument" to turn Plato's Cave "inside-out."

The equation (*symmetry*) of the sexual development of the little girl with that of a boy becomes even more apparent when Freud qualifies the girl's sexual desire in terms of the "penis-equivalent":

> In boys, as we know, this phase is marked by the fact that they have learnt how to derive pleasurable sensations from their small penis and connect its excited state with their ideas of sexual intercourse. Little girls do the same thing with their still smaller clitoris. It seems that with them all their masturbatory acts are carried out on this penis-equivalent, and that the truly feminine vagina is still undiscovered by both sexes. (Freud 1986, 96–97; 1978, VI:118; Irigaray 1985, 34)

Irigaray deduces from these passages that Freud "maintains with consistency that the libido is always masculine, whether it is manifested in males or females, whether the desired object is woman or man." (Irigaray 1985, 35) Freud can only make female desire intelligible and consistent with his psychoanalytic theory in terms of a degraded and failed function vis-à-vis the phallus. Freud's analysis is, Irigaray concludes, not based on sexual *difference* but on sexual *sameness* or,[111] in her own words, it symbolises

> the desire for the same, for the self-identical, the self (as) same, and again of the similar, the alter ego and, to put it in a nutshell, the desire for the auto… the homo… the male, dominates the representational economy. 'Sexual difference' is a derivation of the problematics of sameness, it is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same. (Irigaray 2010, 26–27)

Irigaray acknowledges that Freud is describing a process of symbolisation and that he is not claiming that the description of women's sexual development through the matrix of the phallus is rooted in any anatomical or biological reality — for example, the castration-complex amounts to boys and girls equally, i.e., the experienced lack is male *and* female. But here precisely lies the problem for Irigaray. His ignorance regarding the possibility of a sexual development *outside* the structuring principle of the phallus in fact results in a neutralisation of the sexes — more accurately, the erasure of sexuate differentiations — based on a symbolisation process that has no root in, most notably but not solely, the experiences of one half of the population, namely little girls, and grown-up women. Maintaining that the phallus is a neutral symbol, that is, presupposing that the (symbolic) paradigm for womanhood is a male body minus some attributes, relieves Freud of the task of listening to women themselves in conversation or analysis and deducing from this the appropriate theoretical framework.[112] After all, the psychoanalytic task is, according to Irigaray, to extract a working model or theory based on one's practice, and not to decide on a theory in advance and then apply it to individuals.

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[111] Irigaray's critique of sameness is specifically directed at the preconceived idea of likeness between the sexes: "Are we alike? If you will, but that's rather abstract. I don't really understand "alike." Do you? Alike from whose point of view? In respect to what, what standard or third term?" (Irigaray 1980, 72).

Irigaray's aim is not to discredit Freud, but merely to lay bare the pattern of symmetry — in our terminology, an axis of reproductive mimesis — in response to sexual identity and make its significance clear to the reader. Freud is vocalising a recurring and persistent paradigm of thinking sexual difference on "neutral" terms, which is the expression and reproduction (a simple imitation) of one and the same model, namely a masculine one. Freud hereby replicates an implicit value-judgement on sexual identity that systematically, throughout the history of Western thought, has been removed from philosophical investigation: the idea that differences within and among the sexes *do not matter*. For this phenomenon, Irigaray uses the term "sexual *indifference*."[113]

In Lacan, we see Plato's mirror combined with the psychoanalytic, symbolic order of the imaginary to account for the formation of the ego (or *Gestalt*) and the self. The mirror stage is Lacan's metaphor for how the child develops its relation to its own body. Between the age of six and eighteen months, before identifying with its parents, the child will identify with an image of itself. Seeing itself reflected in the mirror, the small child will spontaneously respond with a "flutter of jubilant activity," which, according to Lacan, signifies a moment of identification (Lacan 2006, 503; 1975).[114] Identification with or assuming the image has a formative property in giving unity to the body and psyche, which is, by itself, unruly and fluid; "it fixes it […] in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast to the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him." (2006, 504) Although the child will spontaneously identify with this unified image, there will always be a split between self and image. This internal split develops into an on-going process of self-reflection, which configures all future identifications, whether it is with the parents, or any other model offered or imposed by the child's environment. Lacan's description of the child's identification process always involves these two moments: the ideal unity of the self, "je-idéal," and its "agency," which is inclined towards a "fictional direction" (2006, 503).

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[112] Irigaray is supported by many feminist writers on this point. Elaine Showalter, for example, argued in her 1985 book *The Female Malady* about Freud and the case of Dora: "Freud failed Dora because he was too quick to impose his own language on her mute communications. His insistence on the origins of hysteria blinded him of the social factors contributed to it." (Showalter 1986, 160) Similar feminist critiques are voiced around that time by, among others, Toril Moi in "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's 'Dora'" (1981). For a more in-depth discussion on Dora through a feminist lens, see the volume *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism* (1990) edited by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. For a more general discussion on the relationship between feminism and Freud, see *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1989), edited by Teresa Brennan, and *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (2012), edited by Gill Plain and Susan Sellars.

[113] Irigaray coined the term "sexual indifference" in *Speculum of the Other Woman,* see (Irigaray 2010, 28; my emphasis). For further reading on the notion of sexual indifference, see (Teresa de Lauretis 1988). It is also worth mentioning that Irigaray applies, particularly in *Speculum,* her own conception of psychoanalysis to argue that the "forgetting" of sexual difference by philosophers is a red thread throughout the entire history of Western thought.

[114] For a feminist account of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, see Elisabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990).

According to the early Lacanian model, *mimesis* or *mimétisme* — imitating examples from one's environment — lies at the heart of subjectivity. Mimesis is the structuring principle of how we view the world and offers, moreover, the imaginary tools which enable us to express ourselves in language and accomplish projects in the world.[115] The order of the imaginary allows us to differentiate between what is meaningful and futile, what is possible and what is not possible in relation to our individual capacities. This mimetic identification process plays out on a psychological and physical level. Reflecting on one's capabilities is the product of an "I" that is characterised by a mental unicity that remains the same over time (Lacan 2006, 504). Perceived possibilities and limitations of the "I" are integral to the body's unity, which develops over time, relationally, via the mirror image and perceptions of objects and other people's bodies in the close environment. This is also why, for Lacan, the body image comes about through both an individual and collective imaginary (van den Ende 1999, 58–59).

The reason why we took some time to (briefly) summarise Lacan's mirror stage, is because it is the necessary background for understanding Irigaray's ambivalent attitude towards mimesis in general and the Lacanian psychoanalytic account of subjectivity in particular. On the one hand, she criticises the mirror's logic of *inversion* (based on a symmetry between self and image) to explain the dynamic of subject formation, particularly for women. We will explain this critical point below first. On the other hand, Irigaray uses and supplements Lacan's symbolic order, including its mimetic component: she advances a new form of interaction between imaginary, body, and language, which suggests a fluid and hybrid, i.e., non-inverted function of the mirror to explain the development of women's (sexuate) identity. We will discuss her alternative symbolic subsequently.

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[115] For a detailed account of the mirror stage via mimesis, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (1991). Although contextualised within a different discussion on mimesis, see also Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's book on Lacan entitled *Le Titre de la Lettre* (1973).

Irigaray argues that Lacan's psychoanalytic account of identity formation is based on an attitude of sexual indifference when he uses the previously discussed flat mirror to describe the female sex. Here, Plato's mirror analogy is implemented to equate the ontology of sexual identity with *visibility*. When the little girl or young woman looks into the mirror, she is confronted with

> *the horror of nothing to see.* A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scoptophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'. This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own. (Irigaray 1985, 26)

The mirror reflects, represents, symbolises the female sex organ as a "hole," or lack. Irigaray points out that lack is specifically qualified here as lacking *form*: it is a "rien à voir" (a nothing to see) that comes down to a "rien n'avoir" (having nothing, having no shape) (Irigaray 1985, 26). Visibility and form are categories that belong to a male paradigm as they symbolically refer to a male body's anatomy. Within this Lacanian framework, flux, matter, and fluidity are considered the body's natural disposition, which, through the mirror stage, will be shaped according to a unified, stable image of itself. The mirror image here functions as stabilising the fluid and fluctuating qualities of the body. In other words, fluid qualities are considered passive in the sense of needing an external force to receive, perceive and be perceived as having — qua subjectivity — a proper shape.

Irigaray's problem with this model is that the ideality of the unity of the body, as a premise for entering the symbolic order, involves the (symbolic) image of the sex organ as lack or absence. It is not necessarily the mirror stage as such that she critiques but the principle of lack (and the reproductive dialectic it imposes) regarding women's relation to understanding their own (sexual) development. In Irigaray's view, Lacan's notion of lack is at odds with the specifics of female experiences and workings of the body, desire, sexuality, and imaginary, as well as a productive notion of mimetism. The symbolic model of unity-through-lack is inaccurate because the development of young girls is not predicated on the dualistic notion of visibility and absence, but on modalities of fluids; "blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire…light" (Irigaray 1993b; 1985, 106–18). Fluids and fluidity are Irigaray's concepts to counter the passive/active dialectic inherent in Lacan's symbolic centred around the phallus. For her, the conceptual model of fluidity is much more apt to describe and investigate the productive aspects of human desires, drives and inclinations in relation to different notions of the (sexuate) self. Moreover, it accounts for desire as *in se* productive: desire generates processes without any pregiven goal. Desire is also not formed, modelled, or fixed by any outside force because it can at least partially give itself material form as its production process includes the production of its own models. I still say partially because Irigaray is precisely interested in the interplay between, for example, bodily drives and the way it is expressed through cultural norms, images, gestures, and ideas about the female body as sexuate. The point is precisely that a symbolic order allows for a dynamic between these elements that can be perceived by individuals as potentially meaningful and that can as such help shape our decisions and actions. It is in the reconsideration of *how* these elements affect each other that we can begin to see different functions of difference generated by desire.

Irigaray's conceptualisation of fluids is not limited to the body but covers all dimensions of the symbolic order: body, language, *and* imaginary. It is hence pivotal for young women to mirror themselves according to an imaginary that reflects this fluid, multiple and hybrid status because this is the background against which they will develop their speech and physicality. From a social and ethical perspective, it is also vital for women to be embedded in a culture where it is not considered taboo to produce images, stories, myths, scientific and spiritual practices that provide the elements to foster and make fertile such a female imaginary.[116] This requires, says Irigaray, that we think radically differently about the (symbolic) relation between the body's fluids, the function of language and the nature of the production of images in the formation of the self. So, what we have established so far is that Irigaray argues for the importance for women of a symbolic subjectification process that resolutely distances itself from a visible/invisible, presence/absence dialectic in favour of a multi-layered symbolic of fluidity.

Her female symbolic does not categorically reject the je-idéal as a unified whole. However, this unity can only be constituted *temporarily* and in *fragments* or rather *fluid parts* of the self as the female self is always several in relation to the other ("You/I are always several at the same time") (Irigaray 1980, 72). Living-in-the-feminine is hence fundamentally constituted by unpredictable and disruptive differentiating qualities, which are integral to the sex organ and female sexuality ("My life is all suppleness, tenderness, mobile, uncertain, fluid") (Irigaray 1992, 23). These fluids are not to be overcome but to be investigated, explored, and cultivated through (among other things) speech: they [women] must "say [their] multiplicity" (Irigaray 1980, 73).[117]

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[116] Works such as *Elemental Passions* (1992), *Marine Lover* (1993b), *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993c), and *The Forgetting of Air* (1999), in which the notion of female fluids are explored through a conceptualization of the elements (water, earth, fire, air), are attempts to restore such a female genealogy. For a Dutch account, see *Renaissance: drie teksten* (1990), translation and comments by Agnès Vincenot, Marion de Zanger, Heide Hinterthür and Anne-Claire Mulder.

Irigaray's sexuate-specific symbolic, based on the idea of the subject being several at the same time, runs counter to the Lacanian sexuate-neutral orientation towards psychic, physical and social unity. She critiques the assumption that women will be — like boys — dispositioned towards the same unifying ideal. At best, it would be a cruel imitation act ("mimesis imposed") for women to meet society's (phallocentric) standards as to how to express themselves and be recognised as Woman. Expressions of the feminine are not explained by the child's desire for form and visibility ("phallus-envy") but rather by the continuation of the relation with the mother (who is moreover irreplaceable, i.e., she cannot be substituted by another — male — figure) and has also nothing to do with hate towards or rivalry with the other sex (Irigaray 1993c; 1995, 107–8; Stone 2011).

Why does this female symbolic require an account of mimesis if it so strongly opposes the flat-mirror logic (i.e., copying to gain unity)? Looking at a productive account of the feminine through a mimetic lens would entail cultivating a (individually and culturally) hybrid language of the body, sexuality, and relations with the other. As has been suggested before, this is not as easy as it sounds. It requires, for women, to work their way through the reproduction of a male imaginary as it generally functions as the accepted operative logos of society. Rosi Braidotti explains it as follows:

> the quest for a point of exit from phallogocentric definitions of Woman requires a strategy of working-through the images and representations that the (masculine) knowing subject has created of Woman as Other. Irigaray renders this through the strategy of 'mimesis'. (Braidotti 2016, 45)

Braidotti's idea of "working-through" is exactly what Irigaray has in mind with her idea of an imposed mimesis: women must adopt the appearances of Woman to be taken seriously in society, which simultaneously functions as the precondition for exceeding and ridiculing those figurations. Braidotti is right in calling this destabilising act by women mimetic. However, it expresses only one side of — or the first step in — Irigaray's general understanding and use of mimesis. Insofar as women can assume or mimic the role of Woman with the aim to sabotage its restrictive, oppressive, sexist, and denigrating qualities, mimesis can indeed be understood instrumentally and strategically. The reason why we took some time to elaborate on Irigaray's and Lacan's psychoanalytic framework is because their centralisation of *mimétisme* in the formation of the self allows for a much more complex account of the feminine subject.

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[117] In *Between East and West*, Irigaray argues that the female symbolic, in which fluidity, "blending" [*mixité*] and difference are central, is the cradle of "cultural fertility": "It is a new agenda, for which we lack the training. Cultural fertility would no longer be tied to the improvement of a single subject in relation, whether as accomplice or rival, with its peers. It would result from listening and the effects of mixing, difference revealing itself there as a source, not only of natural fertility between man and woman, but also of spiritual and symbolic productions the novel character of which would be proportional to the situations with which we are confronted daily." (Irigaray 2009, 168–69; 2002, 141)

One might say that using mimesis as an emancipatory tool presupposes a unified self that can evaluate the given situation and chose to employ the weapon of mimicry to turn events around. Looking at mimesis from a general — perhaps simplistic — feminist viewpoint, it could be easy to settle with the idea of mimicry as a convenient instrument to "challenge the patriarchy." In that case, mimicking would be a playful tool that women can use to affirm their agency and to subvert preconceived ideas about what it means to be a woman in society. As many have argued, Irigaray's "mimetic" writings of the works of important figures in the history of philosophy is the prototype example of exercising, for instance, the critical potential of irony, ridicule, and laughter. This is an important step in "jamming the theoretical machinery," as Irigaray once stated. Nonetheless, considering what we have discussed in the context of Irigaray's psychoanalytic insights, the notion of "theory" (in jamming the theoretical machinery) would for her only be intelligible and accessible through a reform of the symbolic order. Using theory mimetically (replicating the phallocratic logic of the text of one's opponent to debunk its internal inconsistencies) can only be effective, active, and productive if women's modes of expression are hereby benefited, expanded, and diversified. Irigaray's mimesis must hence reject a reactionary account of simple imitation.

Echoing Lacoue-Labarthe's discomfort towards philosophical theorisation as a "discipline," for Irigaray, this must go hand in hand with the problematisation of the disjunction between theory and practice: the idea of a female symbolic, in which women learn, experiment with, and challenge the feminine through bodily, linguistic, and imaginary tools of expression makes sense only if theory and practice affect and work in line with each other. So, if Irigaray's writing claims to be the exemplification of the transformative, fluid and hybrid dimensions of a feminine voice, a *parler-femme*, then her *mimétisme* must somehow demonstrate the activation of *another* mode of difference than the one(s) offered by the philosophies that she critiques.

3. The Scene of Origin

In our previous section, we have explicated the ontological stakes of a Platonic metaphysics of mimesis. Based on this model, we have developed Irigaray's reinvestment in the mirror metaphor, specifically through her rewriting of Alice and her critical evaluation of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. We showed how, from Irigaray's perspective, it symbolises a mechanism of exclusion when it comes to the expression of the feminine, female sexuality and a female imaginary. We have also made the first step in showing that despite this "major" logic of symmetry underlying the mirror model, Irigaray demonstrates minor transgressions of the feminine that resist identification with Platonic specularisations of Woman. Rather than accepting the metaphysical mirror as an instrument for/of thought, Irigaray focuses on the conceptually dissymmetrical sexuate nature of the conditions under which mimetic forms of (female) subjectivity occur, expanding on Lacan's symbolic. In what follows, we will further explore how these transgressions are intrinsically connected to rethinking the stage, the scene, of mimesis. For this, I will now turn to Irigaray's interpretation of Plato's concept of *chora* (receptacle) in "Plato's Hystera." I will in part rely on Elena Tzelepis's and Athena Athanasiou's edited volume *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and "the Greeks*" (2010), which effectively shows how Irigaray's work on the "Ancients" involves incorporating Greek mythology especially when it comes to female genealogies (2010, 4). Against this background, Plato's *chora* can be seen as both the physical and metaphorical place or territory of the feminine. The *chora*, with its ancient signification of the place outside the city proper as well as its association with the womb, is further conceptualised by Irigaray. Moreover, the idea of the receptacle is reminiscent of Derrida's and Lacoue-Labarthe's problematisation of the idea of the mime's "blank surface," substituting for a manifold of characters or models, and without being a "passive receiver". Irigaray is picking up where Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe left off (or started where Lacoue-Labarthe began as Irigaray historically came before him). Irigaray's notion of the feminine mime as receptacle is neither tied to immobility nor to a paralysed "outside" where the feminine is yet again posited as an unreachable and untannable mystery.[118]

3.1 The Stage Setup: Plato's Cave

In "Plato's *Hystera*," Irigaray introduces what she calls the topography of Plato's Cave (Irigaray 2010, 245–46). At first glance, it is not immediately clear why she uses this term. As glossed by the standard dictionary definition, and when we talk in more everyday terms about topography, we usually have in mind the study of the forms and features of land surfaces

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[118] Elisabeth Grosz develops Irigaray's insights about the notion of chora further in *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995). Also worth noting is Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), which played an important role in recontextualising Plato's concept of chora in contemporary thought, specifically in relation to the notion of the semiotic. For further reading on contemporary readings of Plato's *Timaeus*, including interpretations of *chora* by Derrida, Kristeva, Butler, and Irigaray, see Max Statkiewicz, *Rhapsody of Philosophy* (2009, 132–61).

(Cambridge Dictionary 2021b). Does this mean that Irigaray wants to describe the natural forms and features of the hollow of a cave? Not entirely: she is interested in the *milieu* of Plato's Cave. Rather than explaining the purely physical appearance of the cave's forms and features, a milieu (again according to its basic definition) refers to "the physical, and social conditions and events that provide the environment in which someone acts or lives." (Cambridge Dictionary 2021a). A milieu brings to the fore a place that is first and foremost lived-in (it contains organic material) and, second, functioning — both in part and as a whole — according to social and physical conditions that are singular for that place. So, Irigaray investigates how the attributes of Plato's Cave — the prisoners, the puppeteers, the screen/wall, the opening of the cave and the road towards the outside world, the fire, the sun, the shadows, as well as Plato himself — generate events and encounters constitutive of that milieu.

The first characteristic of this milieu, says Irigaray, is that it is induced with theatricality. Plato's Cave is a "theatrical arena" and this arena is shaped like a "womb" (2010, 243, 245). The place of the "stage," the "circus," the "theatre," the "show," the "scene of representation" (Irigaray uses these words interchangeably (2010, 250–56, 260, 263, 265, 266, 268, 285, 291, 345)), is a place "for *living*, *dwelling* for a certain time or even for all time, in the *same place*, in the *same habitat*." (Irigaray 2010, 243)

Before we can discuss the implications of Irigaray qualifying Plato's Cave as a habitat of the same, let me first briefly set the stage of the myth. In Book 7 of *Republic* (2013b, 514a–520a), Plato describes a dialogue between Socrates and Glauco, in which Socrates shares with his interlocutor the following: imagine a cave that is connected to the outside world by a corridor. This corridor is so long that the sunlight does not reach the inside of the cave. Several prisoners are chained inside the cave: they sit with their backs to the entrance and in front of them they see the back wall of the cave. Because they are chained by the neck and ankles, they cannot move their bodies. They can only look straight ahead. They do not know of each other's existence. This is how they have lived their entire lives. There is also a fire behind the prisoners. Between the fire and the prisoners is a small wall. Behind it, people — puppeteers — are busy with figures they carry above their heads: stone and wooden objects in various shapes such as people and animals are moved to and fro. This puppetry casts shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. The voices of the puppeteers are also echoed by the wall in front of them. One day, one of the prisoners, the philosopher, is released from his chains. With great pain and effort, he gets up and walks the long corridor, to the outside. There he will feel the warmth of the sun and he will discover that things outside the cave seem much brighter to him. He has to conclude that this is the real world and that he has been living in a shadow world all this time, under the influence of opinions based on false and misleading representations. With this knowledge, he returns to the cave with the intention of freeing the other prisoners. He will show them the world where they can acquire true knowledge, away from the world of illusory representations. The prisoners, however, consider the philosopher a fool. They prefer to stay in their shadow world, which they believe to be true, and would even have killed the philosopher if they had been given the chance.

The cave metaphor depicts Plato's dualism: in addition to the sensory world in which we live, there is another world, the realm of Being, that is more real. The sensory world, i.e., the world of Becoming, and the realm of Being are separated from each other in the same way that the cave's inside and outside realm are separated. The long walk to the outside world represents the long way we mortals have to go to distance ourselves from opinions that might be deceiving and morally dubious. According to Plato, everyday opinions, based on our subjective sensory experience, distract us from questions that penetrate to the essence of Justice, Truth, Beauty and the Good.

What is foregrounded in Irigaray's analysis is the use of symmetry in Socrates's explanation of the myth. Like Carroll's tale of Alice and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, the image of the mirror functions as the matrix of Socrates's evaluation of the sensible world, which is degraded, negative and a bad copy vis-à-vis the world outside, which represents the realm of Being and Self-Same. Plato has set up the place of the cave such that it becomes the perfectly symmetrical mirror-image of true knowledge: shadows, reflections and echoes depict the movement, duplicity, difference, metamorphosis, and multiplicity in our perception and thinking. These are, as we may well know by now, other words for (ontological) lack. Now, Irigaray's fascination with the theatricality of Plato's Cave is perhaps slightly different than what one might expect. She does not necessarily call the inside of the cave, with its puppetry and echoing voices, a place for theatre. This would mean repeating what we already know from Socrates's explanation of the myth. Her interest goes out instead to what she qualifies as a "theatrical trick" in Plato's reasoning: Plato's Cave is based on a dramatization of thought (Irigaray 2010, 244).[119] The duplicity that operates in drama and theatre does not function in Plato as a derivative of the pre-given metaphysical model of the same, but rather:

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[119] Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "The Method of Dramatization," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974* (2004, 94–116). In this short text, presented at the doctoral defense of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze lays out some key philosophical claims that, according to him, underpin the method of dramatization. In his view, dramatization sprouts from a critical, practical, and aesthetic expression of concepts.

the act of dramatization is the organising principle of the mirror logic and its law of the same that underlies Plato's Cave.

What hence motivates Irigaray is the question what makes Plato's theatre of representation possible. Plato is using dramatizing qualities of thought, rooted in duplicity and difference, which structure his distinctions. Plato turns everything upside down and inside out to make vivid what is already given in the den, the so-called "*sight of day"* in the back of the cave:

> The orientation functions by turning everything over, by reversing, and by pivoting around axis of symmetry. From high to low, from low to high, from back to front, from anterior to opposite, but in all cases from a point of view in front of or behind something in this cave, situated in the back. *Symmetry plays a decisive part here* and you will always already have lost your bearings as soon as you set foot in the cave; it will turn your head, set you walking on your hands. This theatrical trick is unavoidable if you are to enter into the functioning of representation. (Irigaray 2010, 244)

Plato's use of symmetry works only insofar as one accepts his dramaturgy of thought where every single attribute of the myth (the sun, the prisoners, the shadows, the philosopher, etc.) functions as a model of reproduction, duplication, and repetition. We have to make sure to properly understand this insight. What Irigaray means is that using the mirror as the "stage" of thought entails the production of two things: 1) a mirror palace of concepts that are to be understood in oppositional terms, and 2) the notion of identity or self-same as an image. Hence, Plato's Cave makes a very specific mimetic relation its stage, namely a relation in which identity and representation are symmetrically constituted as each other's mirror-image. That is, they become reversable terms. By consequence, Plato's depiction of the inside of the cave (Becoming) as well as the world outside (Being) cannot function other than as neutral surfaces upon which duplicity and identity are reflected in each other's mirror. In this sense, Plato's Cave — that is, the reasoning behind Socrates's explanation of the myth — can never step outside of its own specularisation of thought; it can never diverge from the circulation of identity and image/representation. In Irigaray's terminology, Plato's Cave functions as

> a *topographic mime*, but one whose process of repetition, reproduction is always already multiply doubled up, divided, scaled down, demented, with no possible recourse to a first time, a first model. (Irigaray 2010, 246)

Although there might not be a first model that can be posited as the stable ground upon which we can accept and legitimise the dubious qualities of sensory experience, there is a model, nevertheless. If we must understand the allegory of the cave as a theatre of representation, as Irigaray suggests, then we can be assured of at least one thing and that is that the dramatic stage operates as the necessary condition for creation. In the case of the dualism inherent in Platonic metaphysics, we are speaking of an idea (the transcendent realm of Being) that can become intelligible and insightful *because* there is a dramatization of thought, a "scenography" as Irigaray calls it, that will give that idea its function within that milieu, so that it can become expressive, both intellectually and affectively. This model of dramatization is not a "first" model in the sense that it comes "before" the idea. Dramatization is what emerges *in* the creation of concepts, images, and differentiations. This might still sound somewhat abstract at this stage, so let me try to explicate this insight by looking a bit more concretely at the notions of theatre, mime, and performance in the context of Irigaray's thought.

3.2 Plato's Cave is a "Topographic Mime"

Irigaray's choice of calling the Cave a "topographic mime," in the passage above, is revealing but not so self-evident. Strictly speaking, Irigaray uses "mime" here to designate the mirrored function of the fire in the cave vis-à-vis the sun: "A fire lighted by the *hand of man* in the 'image' of the sun […] is a light that gives little light. That produces only shadows, reflections, fantasies […]" (Irigaray 2010, 246–47). However, as with previous examples, this mime will be turned on its head as Irigaray shows that its function does not go *one way*: the cave in turn models the world it replicates:

> For if the cave is made in the image of the world, the world—as we shall see—is equally made in the image of the cave. In cave or 'world' all is but the image of an image. For this cave is always already an attempt to re-present another cave, the *hystera*, the mold which silently dictates all replica's, all possible forms, all possible relation of forms and between forms, of any replica. (Irigaray 2010, 246)

In the forthcoming part, we will elaborate on the Cave from the viewpoint of the *hystera* ("uterus" in Greek) through her notion of the *chora* ("town" in Greek, but also used by Irigaray as "womb"). It seems that for Irigaray mime can be used for a place or milieu as well as for a mode of philosophising. And even more poignant for our analysis, Irigaray's material exploration of mime means that she considers the place of theatre, the cave's milieu, in convergence with the constitution of the sexuate subject. In other words, the model of mime or theatre that she is using to invert Plato's metaphysics is the exact same model that she uses to pervert and modify the psychanalytic models of the subject presented by Freud and (to a certain extent) Lacan. It is on the basis of this conceptual groundwork that she can begin to formulate transgressions of the feminine.

The realm of performance, which is how we must, according to Irigaray, interpret the evocation of Plato's Cave, is personified in and by the mime as performer. Like Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe, Irigaray does not expansively talk about the figure of the actor. We can nevertheless attempt to determine what Irigaray has in mind with her double qualification of Plato's Cave as a mime. Firstly, as we established before, the mime is a figuration of the subject that can show us not only the many faces of representation (i.e., the actor's many masks) but also *modify* the conditions under which those representations occur during the performance, which transforms those models on a fundamental level. The mime has a necessary double relation to mimesis: it not only represents, but it also provides the dramatic principles on the basis of which mimesis or representation as such become the subject of consideration. In other words, within the context of performance, mimesis/image/representation are not simply given notions. They must always be re-created and internally transformed every single time a performance is "happening". Mimesis/image/representation are in this sense always subject to dramatization. Let me develop this point a bit further.

What characterises the constitution of the mime as subject, is that it is aware of the properties or attributes it temporarily possesses —properties relating to, for example, the voice, the body, the face, the images, and emotions it evokes, the stereotypes it ridicules, the ideals it presents, and so on. It also has temporarily mastery over those attributes and its dramatic effects while acknowledging that it is itself, as "subject," without a ground or stable core. Just think of the moving fire in the cave, providing the light that gives form to theatrical simulations, which are not unlike human figures or actors. In that same vein, the mime does not need any original, stable form or model to make these attributes the subject of dramatization. Displaying a variety of figures and qualities, mime contains two important elements that we have discussed in earlier chapters, 1) the act of disowning oneself and 2) materialising the space or stage for the exchange of and confrontation between bodily properties, affects, symbolic meanings, prejudices, and fantasies. Mime "is" strictly speaking not the representation of "one" character/story/model, but rather the physical, textual, and imaginary manifestation of differentiating models which are set off against each other on the scene. This (dis)playing is what creates the dramatic field or milieu. The mime is never a self-enclosed subject, illustrating one model that can be mimetically distinguished from a "real" person or reality, but rather the matrix around which a stage, a particular form of dramatization, is organised and in which it itself partakes without taking position. Understood in this manner, the mime is a non-subject, designating a non-place, disturbing any fixed ground, and moving constantly without stopping to produce dramatic effects.

Against this background, we can reassess how the term "mime" is used by Irigaray in her revaluation of Plato's Cave. Mime is a notion apt to show not necessarily the idea of the representation of thought (e.g., representations of aesthetic, political and moral life through metaphor, myth, image and/or narrative), but rather the other way around: we are to think of mime as exhibiting the conditions under which the attributes of true knowledge, politics, aesthetics, and morality *create* the stage of, in the case of Plato's Cave, the same. The notions of aesthetics, morality, and proper thought, which play a central role in Socrates's explanation of the Cave myth, are *materialised attributes* of a theatre of the same. In other words, and connecting it to the role of the subject in this operation, these notions are not pregiven and disconnected from the "economy" or "scenography," in Irigaray's words, of the self-stabilising subject who "thinks" and then, in a second step, brings these notions "to life." Instead, the formation of these attributes together functions as the stage on which the self who thinks *appears* as stable. Whichever way you look at it, Irigaray concludes, you start from a mode of dramatization.

3.3 Chora, Passage, Fluidity

We said that Irigaray uses the non-subject and non-place designated by mime as the model for Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Although we are now able to establish how Plato's theatre of the same is based on an infinite regression of mimesis, we are not yet fully given the tools to justify any deviation from this dramatic model. We know that the mime as a theatrical figure is temporarily in charge of its dramatic effects, that it can adopt and disown attributes when it pleases, but this kind of mastery of the stage also implies that it can radically shift the stage of representation. As we said before, the mime never fully falls together with *one* model of representation. Although Plato's Cave is presented through the voice of Socrates as a system of symmetry and self-same, ultimately, this is only *one* possible presentation of the myth. And since the notion of presentation is dependent on the working principle of mime, duplicity and play, many other "theatres" of the myth can be affirmed.

Irigaray locates the potential of other stagings of the myth, echoing the case of *Alice*, in the *passageway* between the two realms symbolised in the Cave myth: the long way from the stay inside to the stay outside the cave. In "Plato's Hystera," Irigaray writes that "each time in these plural operations of deception, the passage from imitating to imitated, from present to past, is withheld. Dazzling trompe-l'oeil!" (Irigaray 2010, 251). Irigaray points at the fact that Plato is withholding a crucial attribute of the myth, which is the "passage from imitating to imitated." Plato makes it seem as if there is no process, no *passage*, between the roles of imitating (Becoming) and being imitated (Being). Here the figure of the mime can again help us clarify. The mime does not just change from the figure who is imitating to the figure who is being imitated with a blink of an eye: the mode of dramatization involves a practice and a constant flow of creative decision making; each dramatization is work, or, with Lacoue-Labarthe, constitutes a *techne*. The reversal of opposites (imitated/imitating) is not given, it is something that must be, through modes of dramatization, made expressive time and time again. It is also in this "passage," where other models of mimetic relations occur and can be explored. For example, a relation between imitating and imitated that is dissymmetrical, non-dualistic and irreplaceable.

Irigaray is interested in a mimetic model in which original and copy are constituted as not interchangeable. The notion of two terms not being reversable is central in Irigaray's mimetic approach to the feminine: the feminine can exist in her mimetic relation to an order that favours the masculine subject, but, at the same time, that cannot imply that her function is to be reduced to the inverted image of that masculine model.[120] This type of imitation is a cover up ("mimesis imposed") as it neutralises and represses an internal difference in the mimetic act itself and women's relation to (masculine) models of Woman. Irigaray argues that it is the passage that makes the mimetic act possible in the first place, which creates the space for the creation of other models of the feminine and on women's own terms. Let us look a bit more closely at the idea of passage through Irigaray's complex but very rich account of the *chora* (receptacle).

In line with thinkers such as Derrida, Kristeva, and Cavarero, Irigaray borrows the term *chora* from Plato as discussed in the context of his creation story in *Timaeus*.[121] The general idea being that for the eternal world of Being to instantiate its intelligibility into a world of Becoming, there needs to be a third notion or place, a *chora* (Plato 1929, 122–23; 52a-b). A *chora* is a so-called *atopos* — its etymology is connected to *atopy*, meaning "out of place," "odd," "unclassifiable," of "high originality," without being an "ideal" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.) — that arises out of Plato's two opposing realms of the intelligible and the visible but which falls outside of those realms. In Plato's account of the *chora*, there is an explicit reference to the feminine and the womb as the place of birth: "and a third Kind is ever-existing Place, which admits not of destruction, and provides room for all things that have birth," and a bit earlier calling it "the nurse of all Becoming" (Plato 1929, 112–13; 49a, 122–23; 52b). The *chora* is thus enigmatic in the sense that it cannot be grasped by either intelligible ideas or sensory experience. Because the *chora* is strictly speaking not a place — it is not stable and solid like a place "proper" — Plato qualifies the *chora* as a "nothing," a "phantom,"

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[120] Irigaray critiques Merleau-Ponty's account of the reversibility of the roles of "touching" and "being-touched" in *Elemental Passions* (1992). According to Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty dismisses the irreducible differences regarding the male and female body. According to a sexuate-specific account of the body, bodies do not merge, their functionality, working principles and evocations are irreversible because they cannot be indifferent towards the notion of being sexuate, with all the physical, linguistic, and symbolic associations that come with it. What is also interesting in light of Plato's discussion on the fluidity of the elements, in this book Irigaray connects her ethics of sexual difference to a radical reform of thinking the elements, namely through the passions.

[121] For Derrida's deconstructive take on the chora, see "Chōra," in *On the Name* (1995), pp. 89-127. Kristeva provides a psychoanalytic account of the chora, focusing in particular on motherhood in "Motherhood accordingto Giovanni Bellini," in *Desire in Language* (1980), pp. 237-270. For her use of chora in challenging the logocentric tradition of Western thinking, see *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Cavarero's analysis of the chora is largely based on Kristeva's account of the maternal in relation to speech and voice, see "The Maternal Chora; or, The Voice of the Poetic Text," in *For More Than One Voice* (2005), pp. 131-138.

> itself being apprehensible by a kind of bastard reasoning by the aid of non-sensation, barely an object of belief; for when we regard this we dimly dream and affirm that it is somehow necessary that all that exists should exist in some spot and occupying some place, and that that which is neither on earth nor anywhere in the Heaven is nothing. So because of all these and other kindred notions, we are unable also on waking up to distinguish clearly the unsleeping and truly subsisting substance, owing to our dreamy condition, or to state the truth—how that it belongs to a copy—seeing that it has not for its own even that substance for which it came into being, but fleets ever as a phantom of something else—to come into existence in some other thing, clinging to existence as best it may, on pain of being nothing at all. (Plato 1929, 122–25; 52b-c)

The *chora* carries interesting paradoxes: it is inconceivable yet accessible through a peculiar "bastard reasoning," which Plato does not elaborate; the *chora* gives rise to Becoming though never falling together with the realm of becoming as such; it is "nothing," a "phantom" yet a source of creation and birth. The last sentence is also relevant: the *chora* comes into existence "in some other thing." We must understand the *chora* as a source of becoming that is always in motion as it finds its (temporary) place in something else. This implies an infinite movement, a reaching for that "other," never clinging to that "other" as a final standpoint because it must maintain its fluidity. The translation of the *chora* as "receptacle," i.e., "repository" or "holder," becomes clearer now: it must not be thought of as a static box, passively taking things in. Instead, a receptacle is that non-place which must be assumed for things to come into being and able to overflow in each other. Since Plato's explanation is contextualised within a creation story, the function of the receptacle is explored through the elements, emphasising the difficulty of distinguishing between the elements for they overflow in each other.[122]

What is at stake in Irigaray's reading of Plato's conception of the *chora* is, firstly, the idea that the fluidity of this "third" place must not become yet again a passive, receptive "nothing" that has as a mere task the birthing of what can then again, in a second or third move, be contained within the realms of Being or Becoming. In other words, Irigaray argues that if Plato takes seriously the affirmation of the *chora*'s fluid productions, it must also take into consideration the birth of qualities that fundamentally cannot be reintegrated into either the realm of Being or Becoming, as two preestablished categories that are neatly distinguished and stabilised. Secondly, and following from the first principle, what must be reconsidered regarding the *chora*'s fluidity, is the transgression of the duality of original (Being) and copy (Becoming). The idea of transgression must be understood in a very specific sense in Irigaray's philosophy, namely as an excess, an *overflowing* of qualified characteristics. Irigaray's receptacle demands a qualification of a "nothing" or "phantom" that is not *devoid* of characteristics, but rather the generative term that gives birth to characteristics in a never-ending overflowing of qualities. These minor, inconceivable yet fundamental transgressions of the receptacle are so fluid that there is no point in calling them "things" in the self-transparent and self-affirming sense of identity. Indeed, what Irigaray's fluid account of the receptacle short-circuits is the quest for "solids" as she writes in "The 'Mechaniscs' of Fluids": "the generalisation of an economy restricted to solids remains in suspension." (Irigaray 1985, 113)

What Irigaray is motivated by in her critical analyses of Plato, is developing an affirmative notion of fluidity that overflows the binary opposition between Being and Becoming. This will inform her account of the formation of sexual identity, the feminine and a *parler-femme*, and through a theoretical move that is partially integral to Plato's dialogues as well.

To understand this move, we must take one step back, and recall our discussion on the relation between mimesis and subject formation in Plato. Plato makes an analogy between the account of identity formation, that is, the constitution of the subject with the use of mimesis — remember our discussion on Derrida's and Lacoue-Labarthe's readings of the earlier notions of mimesis in the *Republic* regarding the education of citizens and the moulding of young children's souls — and grander notions such as the creation of a city state or, in the case of *Timeaus*, the universe. With her focus on the fluid, hybrid, process-driven notion of the *chora*, Irigaray shows that Plato's model of mimetic inscription goes in two directions, or better, in circular movements. The subjective roles of imitated and imitator are always, in a never-ending circular movement, caught up in each other: they mutually *affect* and *imprint* each other.

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[122] "How, then, shall we handle this problem, and what likely solution can we offer? First of all, we see that which we now call "water" becoming by condensation, as we believe, stones and earth; and again, this same substance, by dissolving and dilating, becoming breath and air; and air through combustion becoming fire; and conversely, fire when contracted and quenched returning back to the form of air; and air once more uniting and condensing into cloud and mist; and issuing from these, when still further compressed, flowing water; and from water earth and stones again: thus we see the elements passing on to one another, as it would seem, in an unbroken circle the gift of birth." (Plato 1929, 112–15; 49c)

This fluid interplay between imitated and imitator as regards the formation of the subject is, by analogy, explained through a reform of the idea of myth as the paradigm for reason. Irigaray deconstructs myth as a model of theatre and mime which bypasses questions of identity, solidity, activity, and passivity. She does this by calling out the sexuate-specific attributes of the *chora*, whose productions overflow dualistic oppositions by continuously insisting on another theatre, another stage of the presentation of qualified characteristics. In other words, the affirmation of fluidity and fluids plays out both on the level of the formation of the (sexuate) self, and on the level of the constitution of thought, that is, of a logic that will inform our linguistic and imaginary instruments, as well as our overall understanding of being sexuate, and always motivated by the gesture towards that other *as irreducible other*. I will briefly clarify this point by making use of another closely related term of the *chora*, which moreover brings back the paradoxical ground of the mime in Lacoue-Labarthe, namely the Greek word *ekmageion*.

The word *ekmageion* is used by Plato to classify the ontological nature of the *chora* (receptacle), namely as plastic material that receives "bodies," "things," and "figures". In the following passage the most important elements are displayed:

> And of the substance which receives all bodies the same account must be given. It must be called always by the same name; for from its own proper quality it never departs at all; for while it is always receiving all things, nowhere and in no wise does it assume any shape similar to any of the things that enter into it. For it is laid down by nature as a moulding-stuff for everything, being moved and marked by the entering figures, and because of them it appears different at different times. And the figures that enter and depart are copies of those that are always existent, being stamped from them in a fashion marvellous and hard to describe, which we shall investigate hereafter. (Plato 1929, 116–17; 50c-d)

We see again some interesting paradoxes come to the fore. This time the notion of *ekmageion* foregrounds the fluid undercurrent of the receptacle receiving form. The receptacle is considered a constant as it is always and continuously receiving things: it gives birth to all kinds of transformations due to its undergoing of different shapes, but these metamorphoses never come to a fulfilled end. That is, no figure or form is ever fully materialised and incorporated. The receptacle will receive any form or figure yet must never coincide with that shape or form. What remains stable about the receptacle is thus its instability, fluidity and hybridity underlying the reception of forms. In her critical account of Plato's model, Irigaray will be using this conceptual model for her deployment of productive mimesis, however not without seriously modifying it.

As we alluded to before, Irigaray critiques the idea of the plastic receptacle as empty, passive, and non-generative in the sense that it cannot, for example, transform the models it receives or, in turn, model other things: it is pure reception without modification. This also means that it does not have the power to shape its own environment, milieu, theatre. Irigaray writes:

> But the mimetic role itself is complex, for it presupposes that one can lend oneself to everything, if not to everyone. That one can *copy* anything at all, anyone at all, can receive all impressions, *without appropriating them to oneself*, and *without adding any*. That is, can be nothing but a possibility that the philosopher may exploit for (self-) reflection. Like the Platonic *chora*, but also the mirror of the subject. (Irigaray 1985, 151)

In the previous section we said that, in Irigaray's view, Plato's explanations generally downplay or leave out the most important aspect as regards the question of a productivity generated by mimetic relations. Here, again, Plato is ignoring the passage, the processes which give birth to these metamorphoses in the first place. The fact that the receptacle is fluid and hence difficult to mobilise does not mean that it is lacking in ability, says Irigaray. Quite the contrary, Irigaray argues that this undercurrent plastic material is not only receiving qualities, but it is also in the meantime transforming them and giving birth to them in modified shapes—and *open-endedly*, so that we have a production of overflowing qualities marked by the paradoxical tension of receiving form and giving form at the same time.

Considering our notion of the mime actor in terms of its dual relation to mimetic oppositions — on the one hand alluding to the original/copy binary while, on the other, simultaneously, technically, producing and modifying the very models for the representation (the theatre) of that binary — I would like to say one more thing about the etymological root of the Greek word *ekmageion*, which supports Irigaray's theory of mimetic fluidity. *Ekmageion* is a word that is used by Plato in *Theaetetus* and has similar connotations as the receptacle as it signifies the idea of the inscription of memories. In her essay, "Receptacle/Chōra: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato's Timaeus" (2006), Emanuela Bianchi explains the complex structure of this verb, stating that it simultaneously means to *receive*, *give* and *remove* a mark, as well as *give itself* a mark:

> The verb from which it is derived, *ekmassô*, means to wipe clean; in the middle voice, to wipe away one's tears. It also means to mold or model in wax or plaster, to take an impression of or imprint an image. The verb *massô*, in turn, means to touch or handle, to work with hands or knead, and here its internal connection to figuration more generally may be discerned. To figure, after all, is derived from the Latin *figura*, from *fingere*, to mold. *Ekmageion* therefore holds together at once, and indeterminately the mutually contradictory meanings of mark receiving, mark giving, and mark removing. It offers the possibility that it may even mark itself, perhaps indeterminately generating its own impresses as well as receiving them from elsewhere, while continually erasing so that the process may begin anew. It signifies, then, a capacity to me marked, a passive undergoing, moved and inscribed by Being, but also an indeterminate agentic capacity for inscription and erasure. (Bianchi 2006, 127–28)

What is important in Bianchi's exploration of the verb *ekmassô*, is that it points at the receptacle's "doing." Even the mere reception of a model or image is explained as a doing: being imprinted with a model is an activity of the receiver. By comparison, the Greek generalised notion of the *mimesthai*, which we offered as a paradigm for mimetism and mime, also centralises the generative act of receiving an imprint: the mime's reception of qualified characteristics is a reactivation of qualities subjected to *techne*. In other words, what is emphasised is the mime's and receptacle's ability to *do* something with what it is affected by and in turn passing on. In both cases, the question of the mime/receptacle as either passively undergoing models or actively creating and representing them is side-lined, as both are paradoxically implicated in the same *techne*. The ontological status of the mime and the *chora* seem to be similar in this respect. Both the mime and the *chora* constitute an order in which dualisms are put on display and are hereby neutralised in favour of a more generative force which cannot stop but receive, modify, and give birth to models, images, and figures both with respect to its own constitution as well as that which it gives birth to. This will be the conceptual background for Irigaray to argue that fluidity is radically productive.

Where Irigaray's philosophy of the receptacle will deviate from Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe is the notion that the mime or receptacle must be thought of as sexuate-specific. The *chora* is the place of the feminine and the exploration of women's production of models of sexuate being.[123] In other words, the concept of the *chora*, as the third place "outside" the dominant order of dualistic oppositions, must be configured by what she calls an ethics of sexual difference.

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[123] She deviates from Derrida most explicitly on this point. His conceptualization of the "outside" of Plato's *chora* must remain gender-neutral, empty of human qualities, (truly a "nothing" in the way Plato intended) as to avoid anthropomorphising the term. In *Chora*, Derrida writes that Plato's third place, the *genos* and henceforth also the notion of gender, must remain a "neutral space of a place without place, a place where everything is marked but which would be 'in itself' unmarked." (Eisenman and Derrida 1997, 23) Lacoue-Labarthe would perhaps be more sympathetic towards Irigaray's quest for an affirmative notion of the feminine outside the "phallocratic" order as he mentions Irigaray's philosophy as a positive influence on his deconstruction of femininity and passivity through the concept of mimesis in *Typography*. However, he does not move beyond a mere deconstruction of the constitution of femininity within a Platonic discourse.

For example, fluidity in its materialised form is generative of female bodily fluids and must coincide with an image of the womb, which "allows for passage. Of fluids." (Irigaray 1992, 66) In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray elaborates on the implications of this insight with respect to the intricate relationship between the mother's body and the foetus:

> Can this be understood of the body and in its relation to the skin? In a different way from the fetus [*sic*] in its relation with the first enveloping membranes and the umbilical cord. Even though the fetus [*sic*] is a continuum with the body it is in, even though it passes from a certain kind of continuity to another through the mediation of fluids: blood, milk .... The fetus [sic] has a peculiar status which can mean that the child fantasizes itself as a part of that whole that is the mother's body. And it is true that he belongs to that body and is fed by that body until he comes into the world. (Irigaray 1993a, 46)

To fantasise about oneself as part of a larger body that one depends on for one's birth and existence is an image that is, on the one hand, derivative of a concrete, physical reality, and on the other, providing an image that everyone can relate to, and that can develop in what Irigaray calls a female symbolic. A female symbolic seeks to affirm fantasies and desires that emerge from a female morphology and foregrounds a fluid relationship between entities (bodies, concepts, images) that are connected through the passage of fluids but that nevertheless remain singular and fundamentally irreversible to one another. Otherwise put, a female symbolic can be thought of as a staging or a theatre that has fluid attributes as main characters. These attributes allow for irreducible differences between entities but always as affected (inscribed by) and affecting (inscribing) one another. True to the *chora*'s production of the passage of fluids, Irigaray accounts for a female symbolic of desiring, reaching out to that other, giving birth to that other as well as itself, simultaneously, yet without fully merging with that other. In this light, the difference between two entities cannot be thought of, ontologically, as originally separate, and then, in a second move, reversible through some mirror-act as we see at play in Socrates's explanation of the myth.[124] For Irigaray, this is a wrong representation of difference in the consideration of the workings of a female constitution. She hence argues for a representation, a theatre or staging in which passage, fluidity and birth are affirmative, productive attributes of its milieu instead.[125]

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[124] For example, Irigaray shows how Plato reappropriates and disqualifies the feminine as the origin of life through presenting the mother's womb as a mute and empty figuration outside reason and comprehension. According to Irigaray, this dismissal of origin becomes the "matrix" of Socrates's explanation of the Cave Myth: "So men have lived in this cave since their childhood. Since time began. They have never left this place, or topography, or topology, of the cave. The swing around the axes of symmetry necessarily determines how they live, but they are unaware of this. Chained by the neck and thighs, they are fixed with their heads and genitals facing *front*, *opposite* which, in Socrates' tale, is the direction toward the back of the cave. The cave is the representation of something always already there, of the original matrix/womb which these men cannot represent since they are held down by chains that prevent them from turning their heads or their genitals toward the daylight. They cannot turn toward what is more primary, toward the *proteron* which is in fact the *hystera*. Chains restrain them from turning

Now that we have established the function of the *chora* in Irigaray's account of a female symbolic and, coincidingly, proposed an alternative staging of difference, let us explore its implication for the "theatre" of Plato's Cave.

3.4 Plato's Cave is a Theatre of the Unstable

Irigaray prefers to speak of the Cave's place or milieu as a "mime" made up of attributes or characters that allow for fluidity and play. She does not necessarily argue that this is absent in Plato's dialogue. Socrates's evaluation of the myth might cover over the affirmative mimetisms of the *chora*, but that "third" stage is always present as the generative force behind or under Socrates's presentation of the myth. Moreover, it was Plato himself who provided the instruments to conceptually account for the notion of the *chora* in the first place. What the *chora* as mime helps us to conceptualise is the idea that the play-script of Plato's Cave has to be performed, it has to become the production of overflowing qualities in order for its attributes, including Plato's notions of Being and Becoming, to express what Plato wants them to express. Due to the *chora*'s generating forces, Plato's Cave can be presented by Plato as both the expression of and the model of its dramatic milieu.

Irigaray does not understand the mime as placed "in" the theatre, but as the place "of" theatre. Using Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology, which comes very close to Irigaray, we could say that Plato's Cave is about the representation of the Subject and this Subject "is" mimesis — in a similar hyperbolical way as the actor is the representative of theatre, and theatre is the subject of representation. Both Irigaray and Lacoue-Labarthe stress that "subject" must be understood quite literally as the human subject in its material form. As we have seen in the

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toward the origin but/and they are prisoners in the space-time of the project of its representation." (Irigaray 2010, 244). In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray provides several examples of how, according to her, the womb is used — in Western thought and civilization — as the logic or matrix of masculine specula(risa)tion: "He exists in his nostalgia for a return to the ONE WHOLE; his desire to go back toward and into the originary womb [...] From the start, discourse would be for man that other of nature, that mother, that nature-womb, within which he lived, survived, and risked being lost. The discourse that had been intended as his tool for breaking ground and cultivating the world changed into an intangible, sacred horizon for him." (Irigaray 1993a, 100/113)

[125] In *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray writes: "For this culture to advance, therefore, new models of sexual identity must be established. Woman must be valued as a daughter (a virgin for herself, and not so that her body has an exchange value amongst men), as a lover, and in her own line. This means that she should not be subordinated first to her father, her uncle or her brother, then to her husband's line, nor to the values of a masculine identity, whether these be social, economic or cultural. She therefore needs her own linguistic, religious, and political values. She needs to be situated and valued, to be she in relation to her self. (1992, 3)

previous chapter, within the Platonist tradition, the human subject as actor is a central and recurring problem, because he or she holds the magic of oscillating between *logos* and *mythos*. This is not the same as the distinction between truth and falsity, as we know from Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typography*: the mime is indifferent towards such ontological distinctions; it is occupied with the task of dramatization first and foremost. Just like Irigaray's account of the *chora*, the mime is not in the position to take a stance as to what is true or false because the mime "has" and "is" no position. It is not subjected to such distinctions because it "is" not a subject in the "solid" sense of having a stable essence or identity.[126]

In *The Drama of Ideas* (2010), Martin Puchner foregrounds the dramatic grounds of Plato's dialogues. Although not pointing at the mime directly, he makes the same claim as Irigaray as regards the reversibility of the mirror logic underpinning Socrates's explanation of the Cave's myth. The depiction of the world of Ideas depends on the dialogues' material enactment, i.e., the theatre as dramatic form:

> Only after the materiality of the theatre has been dislodged can his dialogues be used to point or invoke abstract forms. These abstract forms, in turn, are never presented by themselves. They arise from the materiality of the theatre precisely when this materiality is drained of its solidity and stability. (Puchner 2010, 33)

Plato's Cave is a theatre of the unstable. Again, we must not interpret instability in light of the metaphysical precondition of identity. Puchner argues that the unstable, material stage does *not* function like the metaphorical flat mirror or simple copy (as Plato wants us to assume). The theatre is not synonymous with the mirror-image of identity. Instead, the milieu of Plato's Cave can best be described as a groundless production of tragic relations, comedic scenes, dreamscapes in which every form of solidity dissolves, concepts materialised in dramatic characters. If Plato's Cave is indeed a theatre, it must contain all the elements that make for a *good* theatre and not a place of bad productions i.e., mere replicas of the same. A repetition of what is already given "in the den" might be theatre but it would be a theatre nobody wants to attend because there will be nothing at stake. As Puchner continues to argue, part of the play of Plato's Cave is that Plato knows all this very well otherwise he would not have chosen such an explicit reference to the theatre:

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[126] The mime is pure mask, as Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us in his rephrasing of Plato: "The mimeticians are the worst possible breed because they are no one, pure mask or pure hypocrisy, and as such unassignable, unidentifiable, impossible to place in a determined class or to fix in a function that would be proper to them." (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 259)

> All he had to do was invent a dramatic form that would both evoke and critique theater; make and unmake characters, scenes, and actions; conjure abstract forms; and rematerialize those forms in the provisional materiality of the theater. (Puchner 2010, 33)

In this light, image and representation are forever disconnected from a metaphysics of the same. Instead, they are pure masks, mimes, or dramatic characters behind which no "one" world is lurking. So, when Irigaray speaks of the representation or image of thought evoked by Plato's Cave, what she wants us to understand is that the role that theatre plays in Plato's thinking is *itself* subjected to hybrid and fluid qualities, illustrated by the womb-like dimension of the cave, even if he seems caught up in his "dream of symmetry." She hence reads Plato against Plato:

> the scenography that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the mirror, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself. (Irigaray 1985b, 75)

How does Irigaray envisage her alternative theatre of fluids? If the female mime is not to be caught up in the (male) subject's specularisation of itself, what "props" does Irigaray provide to allow for a "scenography" that is not once again falling back into an old system of duality? We know that she wants to foreground qualities and characteristics reflective of a female morphology, which we said corresponds to fluid attributes. This suggests another "geometric organization." I suggest we look at Irigaray's image of the womb. What does it mean to say that Plato's Cave functions as a curved theatre — round on all sides — rather than as a specular theatre?

4. *The Feminine Scene: Women's Staging of Fluids & Difference*

First of all, a productive account of fluidity, for Irigaray, must implicate *destabilising* and *parasitising* on that Platonic, reproductive account of mimesis as regards sexual differentiations. The style of fluidity, as Irigaray sometimes calls the way in which women write and speak, entails having no *one* identity but rather conceives of its form as *multiple*. This "fluid" status of a *parler-femme* is not synonymous to being dispersed, unintelligible, untouchable, out-of-reach, and merely falling together with the mode of non-identity. Feminine identity in terms of style is described by Irigaray as being in constant flux which means that "she" is, spatially, both here *and* there, inside *and* outside, never in opposition to but slightly rubbing against or touching what is other:

> It comes back in touch with itself in that origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. *Simultaneity* is its "proper" aspect—a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity- to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbors that create a dynamics. Its "style" resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept, which does not mean that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its "style" cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position. (Irigaray 1985, 88)

For Irigaray, it is "simultaneity" that qualifies the fluidity of a *parler-femme*. Fluidity entails a continuity of properties that cannot be fixed because they do not coincide with themselves, they constantly internally differentiate. Thus, fluidity has properties, but those properties are not to be differentiated from what is solid but rather posit solidity as but one residue of a multiplicity of fluids. Let us look at a more concrete example using Irigaray's idea of mimicry: women can mimic univocally recognisable, "mythical" features of womanhood — resembling the role of the mystic, the virgin, or the whore, for example — but the solidity and fixed nature of this imitation (i.e., the sense in which one seems to fall together with this figure) is only possible *because* women do not coincide with this imitation, they always *simultaneously* produce themselves as "difference": "if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of 'matter,'" that is, precisely, the matter of fluids (Irigaray 1985, 76).[127]

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[127] Judith Butler is not uncritical of Irigaray positing the feminine as "irreducible excess," always to be cast "outside" of language. In *Bodies That Matter*, she starts with a positive description of Irigaray's disruptive account of miming the feminine: "They [women] mime phallogocentrism, but they also expose what is covered over by the mimetic self-replication of that discourse." (Butler 1993, 21) Butler describes Irigaray's mimicry as the reiteration of a masculine configuration of the feminine while, at the same time, uncovering the operational structures responsible for the repression of the feminine. According to Butler, while this miming may unmask the phallocratic laws regulating the role of the feminine in the dominant discourse, it also means that the feminine is therefore *doomed* to be excessive and elsewhere, which, according to Butler, is questionable. In Butler's interpretation of Irigaray's model of parler-femme, the feminine language must accept, affirm, and project into the future its repressed position to unravel the underlying phallocentric logic of its repressed status. In this sense, a "speaking-woman" can only affirm "her" voice from the position of lack vis-à-vis the masculine order. For Butler, this type of miming of the reproductive discourse is ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy. I believe however that Butler's remarks are not at all at odds with Irigaray's general philosophy. As I have tried to suggest, Irigaray is wary of establishing an "exclusively" female language that does nothing but reproduce the idea of fluidity as Identity's opposite. Irigaray's *parler-femme* is not a pre-established, exclusive, proper place outside language, like a category that "belongs" to women and that can operate in isolation from the dominant way of speaking and communicating. Irigaray's *parler-femme* precisely entails *not* falling together with the position of lack.

Irigaray's "matter of fluids" takes the form of perversion and transgression, which means that it is not purely detached from the (possibly oppressive) processes out of which it arises. Yet, its dynamics, effects, productivity, and creativity cannot be fully explained by those processes either. A *parler-femme* is an affirmative troubling of either/or distinctions, which operates *differently* than a reproductive, phallocentric logic that neutralises differences for the sake of symmetry. And not because it is posited or located outside of it — in spatial terms — but because it manages to emphasise other qualities of difference and fluidity than those that can be thought within a dualistic model and dialectics of thought. What is at stake is a different approach to the relationship between mimesis and the production of difference, which is precisely entangled with Irigaray's fluid account of mimesis.

Irigaray's revaluation of the *chora* sheds a new light on the productive formation of the sexuate, feminine subject. The central idea of mimesis as affirmative, material *re-activation and transmission* involving a *simultaneity* and *horizontality* of individuating moments and qualities with different ontological origins (physical, imaginary, symbolic, aesthetic…) corresponds with Irigaray's notion of the inherently dynamic and hybrid formation of sexuate being. It entails an "other" mimetism that is characterised by an active response to what it is affected by (like the mime evoking "other" qualities for its characterisation), which is a dynamic that takes place simultaneously inside and outside of the (imaginary, linguistic and physical) boundaries of the self and are constituted as a multitude of perceptive and corporeal possibilities (Irigaray 1993a, 128–29). In fact, the notions of inside and outside lose their relevance, as these notions insinuate a pregiven spatial boundary—whether this plays out on a physical and/or psychical level. For Irigaray, however, it is the flux of affective processes that take place between body and imaginary, voice and sexual desire that comes *first*. Any boundary or limit that one might discover in the process comes *after* and, moreover, will at some point dissolve again.

In this light, Irigaray's philosophy of productive mimesis entails a fluid, open-ended structure. It designates how to execute, perceive, and experiment with traces of the feminine, which is the very foundation of what it involves being a woman, for Irigaray. If women are denied their fluid, plural and transformative sexuate potential this means that their entire being and purpose of living—their "ontological desire, the desire to be," as Rosi Braidotti puts it—is violated (Braidotti 2016, 44).

The productivity of fluid qualities, conceptualised above in the context of Plato's early intuitions about mimesis, shifts the concept of "difference" as regards sexual difference from *one* dualistic model of the two (male and female) sexes to a relation between two or more concrete individuals who already independently of each other constitute a (irreducible) mode of differentiation within themselves. What is at play in a sexuate account of difference is the *encounter* of varying modes of sexual differentiations presented by the people involved *respecting the corporeal and symbolic significance of their sex*. And this includes the order of the imaginary. A female imaginary cannot be "compared" to a male imaginary because they do not represent "two" "equal" orders. The working of the imaginary in identity formation is such that it is linked to the sexual morphology of concrete people. It does not take the shape of a lucid, graspable set of images, ideals and convictions that can simply be detached from processes of symbolisation. Dissymmetry between the sexes means thus that "one" imaginary cannot be opposed to "another" imaginary and then compared and evaluated on the same grounds.

We can illustrate this point, finally, using Irigaray's view on female sexuality. For women, it is impossible to relate to their bodies and sexuality as a unified, one-dimensional, reproductive system. Her sexual pleasure might include but is not reduced to her ability to have children, for example. The imaginary notion of giving birth has symbolic value, not primarily because of society's standards regarding womanhood (although that might play a role too), but because this possibility is implicated in the specific functioning of the sexual organ. *How* this is implicated is precisely what a philosophy of sexual difference ought to investigate. Irigaray provides several conceptual and visual instruments to do so. Her invention of the image of the two sets of lips, for example, both visually and physically associated with the vagina, is but one possible philosophical starting point to conceptualise a sexuate ontology of difference, in this case sprung from a female morphology. She writes in *Marine Lover* (1993b):

> She does not set herself up as one, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth or essence. The essence of a truth remains foreign to her. She neither has nor is a being. And she does not oppose a feminine truth to a masculine truth. Because this would once again amount to playing the—man's— game of castration. If the female sex takes place by embracing itself, by endlessly sharing and exchanging its lips, its edges, its borders, and their 'content', as it ceaselessly becomes other, no stability of essence is proper to her. She has a place in the openness of a relation to the other whom she does not take into herself, like a whore, but to whom she continuously gives birth. (Irigaray 1993b, 86)

What catches the eye in this fragment is Irigaray's use of the notion of giving birth. Rather than assuming its culturally accepted definition of *reproduction*, Irigaray sees giving birth as the product of a particular corporeal and conceptual dynamic between two bodies, namely as the way in which the ever-changing, differentiating lips relate internally and with the other. The female sex never fully absorbs and coincides with what is other as the unfolding of the lips become the context, the mise-en-scene, of birth, both of her own becoming and of the other. Here, the metaphor of giving birth becomes the ontological predicate for the execution and actualisation of, and experimentation with, female desire. Within this philosophical context, the choice of "actually" becoming a mother is *derivative* and hence not necessary for the development of female desire as such:

> And she has no need *once* to be a mother, *one* day to produce *one* child, to make her sex the place of unceasing birthing. To be a woman, she does not have to be a mother, unless she wants to set a limit to her growth and her gift for life. Motherhood is only once specific way to fulfil the operation: giving birth. Which is never one, unique, and definitive. (Irigaray 1993b, 86)

For Irigaray, the radical concept of the two lips penetrates the realm of philosophy, and more specifically, her theoretical investigation of difference. For her, thinking philosophically about difference is only fruitful if it includes these kinds of models of being sexuate. The singularity of female desire (as open-ended and context-and-body-specific), as I have briefly sketched out above, with its intrinsic relation to the subject's productive mimetisms can be a source for a philosophy of difference.

5. Conclusion

Unlike the equality feminists of her time, Irigaray does not see the social importance of the idea of the feminine and a *parler-femme* as an inevitable nostalgic return to a metaphysically essentialist conception of womanhood. For Irigaray, the primary importance of a feminist-inspired conception of the feminine does not lie in its being the expression of a static, self-contained essence that is disconnected from reality and that is the same for every woman. Irigaray is interested in the condition of being-sexuate only insofar as it brings out the fluidity and differentiating power of singular persons. The assumption upon which the claim of Irigaray's study rests is that the feminine as an expression of womanhood is rooted in a productive and affirmative concept of mimetism, which she paradoxically finds in the caverns (figuratively and physically speaking) of Plato's dialogues. Paradoxically, with his hybrid and dramatizing use of mimesis in his dialogues, Plato has also provided some important groundwork for Irigaray's figuration of subversive and transgressive productions of difference, including sexual difference. Plato did not primarily put forward the concept of mimesis as a subject for philosophical reflection, but rather mobilised the fruitful processes arising from mimetic relations as a conceptual grounding (or matrix) for his determination of philosophy. Moreover, the subcutaneous mimetism in Plato's dialogues, located in the "passage" between the roles of imitating and imitated, requires that one must always keep redefining differences, e.g., between copy and original, in accordance with the milieu, theatre or "mime," in Irigaray's words, set up as the stage for the presentation and transformation of differences. Plato thereby opens the door to side-lining the dogmatism of a metaphysical Platonism. This in part enables Irigaray to break through the implicit Platonism in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and to some extent Lacan. Irigaray does not only find in Plato's feminine conception of the *chora* a passive, silenced and exiled figuration of Woman. Starting from the affirmative notion of the *chora* as a womb, and against the ideas of Freud and Lacan who would render the womb "hollow", Irigaray does not see the female body as an empty box, an "open stage" for mystery, and the male penchant for unity and self-reflection or sexual and rational inaccessibility. Instead, she provides her own original conception of fluidity and fluids that are attached to the female body, language and imaginary: the chora/receptacle is a physical and symbolic place for birth and the necessary passage for the exchange of fluids, whether it be on a purely theoretical/conceptual level or on the material level of meaning production vis-à-vis the sexuate self. The reason why we have contextualised this productive account of the female symbolic as integral to women's account of being-sexuate within the wider scope of non-representational mimesis, is because Irigaray's account of fluidity must be thought against the background of her subversion of a metaphysically dualistic account of the roles of imitator (copy) and imitated (original). Her notion of the "Cave's theatre" having the architecture of a womb, elevates the notion of a passage where qualified attributes do not exist independently, enter the stage, and then leave again without modification. Instead, the notion of a circular passage allows for the idea of qualities to "mark" each other indefinitely so that through that passage-way new transformations of those qualities occur. It is therefore a female morphology that should encourage a symbolic order where the function of symbols are given a fundamentally different interpretation than that of signifying lack and/or fulfilment.

CODA

At the end of the twentieth century in France, the philosophical and historical foundations of the concept of mimesis are being deconstructed on several fronts. Focusing on *mimetism*, the mimetic enactment of qualities and features that precedes the stable constitution of the self as well as language, the philosophies of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray emphasise the subject's internal differentiation in the use of language, which is, as they argue, since Plato, marked by duplicity and hybridity. With their reinvestment in the ancient understanding of *mimesthai* as first and foremost a form of dramatic play, their account of the mimetic subject precedes simple imitation. In Derrida's "The Double Session," this is explored through the literary figure of the pantomime. Following Mallarmé's *Mimique*, the mime is the "locus", the simulated place where a Platonic metaphysics is not just mirrored but *mimed*. Plato's determination of mimesis as a theoretical doctrine is based on the "rootless" and "improper" model of *miming*. Derrida maintains that the philosopher who understands himself (and Irigaray will deconstruct the "him" in this operation) as complying to and demonstrating a metaphysics of truth and presence in language, is always the product of and producing alternative mimetisms at the same time. For Derrida, mimetisms are procedures of knowledge production outside the sphere of a unified language that penetrates self-enclosed and self-identical notions of reality and undermines it from that "outside."

With his introduction of the distinction between good and bad mimesis, i.e., the copy and the mime or simulacrum, Plato introduces, "inscribes" as Derrida calls it, a *double* mimesis into the philosophical language around which a Platonic metaphysics is structured, i.e., a *logos* or rational philosophy. According to Plato's own "double inscription of *mimesis,*" Derrida explains, "it is impossible to pin mimesis down to a binary classification," which he further specifies in the context of Mallarmé's "mimodrama": "there is always more than one kind of mimesis; and perhaps it is in the strange mirror that reflects but also displaces and distorts one mimesis into the other, as though it were itself destined to mime or mask itself." (Derrida 1981a, 191) Plato's introduction of the concept of mime as distinct from the simple copy, paradoxically and ironically, mirrors and displaces its own model of mimetic duality. The very distinction between imitation and mime is the (fictional and masking) by-product of an originally hybrid and differentiating conception of *mimesthai*: the act of the *mîmos* is rooted in reactivating qualities which *pass through* the body and voice, simulating a reality understood as *multiple* in nature. Hence, the figurative "fence" that Plato wants to build in-between image and reality, copy and model, original and derivation, is not really a solid, stable, and transparent fence, but rather a "double-sided mirror," as Lacoue-Labarthe would say. Imitation used in the traditional Platonic sense will from now on within the history of philosophy in the West mirror, distort, and cover over (see Derrida's metaphorical use of the pantomime's white mask as the philosopher's "blank slate" of imitation) the binary oppositions that organise a unitary and self-same account of reality.

Although Derrida deconstructs mimesis via the pantomime as a performative figure, foregrounding the importance of dramatic play in the background of mimetism, there is nevertheless a limitation in Derrida, conceptually and phenomenologically, in thinking about the mime as an actual human being performing and *working with* mimeses. Mallarmé's modernist pantomime is first and foremost used as a metaphor that allows Derrida to break down the mime's imitation of character and life: rather than obeying the laws of imitation, the mime obeys the laws of *play*, in which the imitative act evokes an infinite regression of copies and originals, deferring the difference between the two categories. But this is as far as Derrida goes in explaining the mimetic act, performance-wise. What we take from Derrida is the mime as a conceptual matrix, a formula, that allows us to be critical of unitary and stabilising ontological claims made by philosophers based on the presupposition that there is an intuitive and spontaneous coincidence between the speaking subject, reality, and truth. This also allows us to critique the far-reaching effects of a Platonic mirror logic, as Irigaray calls it, throughout the history of Western philosophy. With Derrida, we now know that on the level of language, the formula of mime precedes and reconfigures imitation as a derivative and fictionalised image, but we are still moving on the level of a deconstruction of a metaphysics of presence via the written text. This is Derrida's focus. But the question remains open whether the notion of dramatic play, linked to the ancient understanding of *mimesthai*, might not tell us more about the *material* procedures of the deconstructive mime. What is for instance the specificity of play in terms of materialised performance? What is the role of the mime as a (*human) self* in light of that deconstructive model? In short: what does the idea of performance, against the background of a deconstructed mime, *add* specifically to the classical representational stage, and the subject as its main character?

Both Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray argue that it is not enough to undercut mimesis on a metaphysical level. Although deeply engrained in Derrida's deconstruction, they adopt the viewpoint of the artist and literary writer, indeed that "other" side of Western philosophy vis-à-vis the quest for a universalising logos. For them, the only way to overcome Platonism is to look at materialised forms of mimetism, taking the mime as a living, speaking, and moving human body with ideas, desires, imagination, and anticipation for the future. For them, the mime cannot just be metaphorical (although they are well aware that in Derrida the status of metaphor itself has undergone a deconstruction). The most radical difference between the two latter philosophers and Derrida, is that they see the problem of the mime as first and foremost a question of transforming language and, moreover, they take *themselves* as the main subject of this quest. Where Derrida purposefully (and with good reasons) abstracts from practical, concrete, and materialised processes of mimetism, Lacoue-Labarthe and Irigaray make it their main project. They aim to transform or shift philosophical thinking by including their own place and voice in the operation, materialising the very problem they seek to address. They stand "inside" the language and from there reproduce, or mime rather, the philosophical terms, concepts and images of their predecessors and colleagues to show the mimetic patterns in their thinking. Meanwhile, they question their own position vis-à-vis this tradition. Rather than directly refuting what is "incorrect," "false," or "illogical," in the philosophical theories that they examine, they take on that indirect "other" language, traditionally assigned to poetry, theatre, and literature. They want to make explicit that they are equally affected by Plato's so-called mirror model of thought and that they cannot, at least not in some simple way, "theoretically" purge that model from their philosophical thinking and being. The idea of the "philosopher" consciously "distancing" themselves from the topic at hand is a false, or rather fictionalised image that Western philosophy has duplicated for centuries and is, they argue, a dangerous disposition for ethical and political reasons. Taking up the figuration of mime illustrates their embeddedness in the reproductive mechanisms of a mirror logic, while reconfiguring and surpassing it through literary and dramatic speech or writing.

Irigaray's introduction and practice of a *parler-femme* is one answer to this precise problem. She says that she cannot abstract from her being a woman because it is based on that very disposition that her own language production, imaginary, and thinking has been covered over, *masked*. Not speaking from the position of being a woman would entail obeying to a phallogocentric logic in which sex supposedly "does not matter." This logos both reproduces and masks that the "neutrality" and "distance" towards being sexuate is in reality the result of a specifically masculine figuration of thought. This logos tends to downplay the insight that words, concepts, meanings, and images are directly affected and informed by one's being sexuate. Bringing her body into language, Irigaray speaks (as) woman, putting Derrida's notion of play into the realm of subversive writing:

> To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. (Irigaray 1985, 176)

The central question is how play, subversion and mimicry are related. Is women's playful repetition always subversive? What exactly makes it subversive and in which sense can Irigaray claim that women are not "simply absorbed" in this function?

There are several levels on which these questions can be addressed (ontological, psychoanalytical, literary…), and they have been in the past, but one dimension that has been underexamined is considering Irigaray's *parler-femme*, and its intrinsic use of playful mimicry from the viewpoint of the relation between literature and theatre. As a close contemporary of Irigaray it is perhaps not a coincidence that Lacoue-Labarthe was concerned with precisely this problematic. For him, the subject of both philosophy and literature in the West has been, since Plato, that of theatre. When Irigaray states that "the world from end to end is organized as *mimêsis*; re-semblance is the law," she not only echoes Derrida's deconstruction of a Western metaphysics centred around (masculine) identity and selfsameness (Irigaray 2010, 149–50). She is also anticipating Lacoue-Labarthe's claim that the reason why poetical language has been degraded within the Platonic tradition, is because of the question of *authority*: who speaks, according to which knowledge, using which narrational tools? These questions can almost literally be found in Plato's considerations regarding mimetic performance. It is the topic of the theatre actor, with its function of displaying and exposing emotions and ideas undercutting the claim to a self-contained logos, that goes to the root of poetical and literary language. And it is from this precise position that Irigaray speaks. She reappropriates mimetism and reclaims the philosophical authority of the feminine voice. In typical dramatic fashion (through her "voicing" of female archetypes and the evocation of laughter, ridicule, and discomfort), Irigaray disarms and neutralises the assumption that Woman can be contained in a unitary figure. This dramatic exposition at the same time produces an ontological surplus in Irigaray's writing, an overflowing of qualities of the feminine marked by irreducible multiplicity and hybridity. The feminist undercurrent being that it should be first and foremost up to women (plural) and their use of language, image, and body vis-à-vis the times in which they live to expose and explore what that "feminine" entails. This is a process marked by hard work (deconstruction is always required), transformation and fluidity. This cultivation of the feminine in and through hybrid and fluid signifiers can by nature not be classified, defined and stabilised in advance.

In my view, Irigaray's *parler-femme* can be further specified as an example of theatrical exhibition as defined by Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy. With his philosophical concept of the *mime de rien* (mime without a model), Lacoue-Labarthe seems to provide two conceptual insights that might be helpful. The first is the idea that the feminine mime could be viewed from the perspective of the actor who, as Diderot revealed in his *Paradox of the Actor,* "has the aptitude for all roles". The second is the idea that the mimetic subject is defined by constant modification. I will explore the two points subsequently. As Nancy clarified, in Lacoue-Labarthe, the notion of "mime without a model" does not designate that there are no models that inform the constitution of the self: there are always models at play in how one relates to oneself and how one is viewed by others. For Irigaray, these models can be produced on three levels: the imaginary (images, fantasies, visuality, virtuality), language (words, narration, literary figuration) and body (sexuality, bodily processes, affect, desire). Now with Lacoue-Labarthe's figuration of the mime, he wants to show that, metaphysically, the models that inform us are "nothing," echoing Plato's mirror logic. According to the mirror logic, a reflection is "nothing" without something to reflect. However, as we saw in Derrida's deconstructive mime, Plato's model works according to a model of *reversal*: a reflection mirrors a model that is, in turn, a reflection of a model, *ad infinitum*. By consequence, each model that seems to have a grip on the self will always be, essentially, gravitating around that ontological nothingness or emptiness. This destabilises the self because it can never fall together with one model once and for all. Lacoue-Labarthe goes one step further and argues that Plato's "nothing" is in fact qualified, it is the *plastic* and the *fluid* — the possibility for a model to change shape at any moment — that is truly the issue for Plato, which brings us back to the theatre and the actor. The actor can modify its shape because it can envision itself according to the models available in life, which are by nature multiple and transformative. Following this line of thought, the *mime de rien* exemplifies the most basic, minimal account of the actor mirroring life: it is not imitating one character, one script or one idea but rather it is mirroring the transformative and hybrid functions of life itself. In the mime's enactment of qualities and characteristics it is life's *vivid* nature that is exposed, not its solidification in thought and body. This has a historical background in the early Greek notion of the *mîmos*. As we can read in Sörbom's account,

> mime is confined to the way we, ordinary human beings, behave, and does not portray the actions of tragic or comic heroes, who transcend the limits of our human world in lofty spheres of existence with rules and laws of their own. (Göran 1966, 24)

From Plato's point of view, this qualification makes of the mime the most "improper" figure in society. Not so much because it disseminates falsities or because it is devoid of any character of its own but because it has the ability to endlessly and infinitely *produce* qualities and *expose* them most "vividly" (Göran 1966, 38). It is the exposition of qualities like fluidity, duplicity and excess that are the issue because they violate the ideals of identity, specialisation, and stability. So why is this Lacoue-Labarthean reconfiguration of mime via Plato helpful in accounting for Irigaray's subversive play in writing? It tells us first and foremost that the mime's obeying of the laws of play are configured around the models of fluidity and hybridity and that these models are not ontologically empty (i.e., without property) but instead they are specified and qualified. This speaks to Irigaray's emphasis on the importance of fluidity in the exploration of the feminine. The feminine mime is not an empty slate unto which one can project any desire, image or ideal, there will always be a vivid surplus that is simultaneously produced in her miming: on the level of the body (the "physical reality" of bodily fluids, desires overflowing in each other), the imaginary (a visual culture of the feminine that holds contradictory terms together), as well as language.

There is still a lot to be said about the issue of fluidity within Irigaray's philosophy and the obvious question would be what that subversive notion of the feminine mime "looks like", how we can "envision" it. There is scholarly work done on the more ontological claims made by Irigaray in her later work that might be able to answer that question. But, within the scope of this study, I would refer to the post-structural dimension of the mime that we have conceptualised through Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe. In line with Irigaray's early work, they would maintain that it is impossible to foresee and determine beforehand what a feminine mime looks like, because it is not pre-determined in its (visual) qualifications and properties. But it is not because we cannot visualise it in advance that it cannot be a horizon that allows for a fundamental destabilisation of identity, which goes to the core of Irigaray's feminist philosophy and her revision of the feminine. With respect to Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy of the *mime de rien*, it would have been interesting to see him develop the phenomenology of the actor and the theatre scene — his "sober theatre" — a bit more, because it could have given us a direction as regards the question how mime can rethink and reshape our notion of theatrical performance. At the same time, the different figurations of the mime that we have investigated in this study suggest that it is not so much a matter of considering the mime as a phenomenon that helps us explain something in reality ("the theatre" for instance), but rather, it is reality that will tell us when we "behave like a mime," as Sörbom's phrase goes, and hence display life's hybrid, vivid, and continuously changing character rather than settle for what is recognisable, identifiable and solid.

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