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Ideality in Theatre. Or a reverse evolution of *mimesis* from Plato to Diderot

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Abstract. This paper deals with a development of the ancient thought on mimesis in its modern reception as regards a certain idea of theatre. It defends the hypothesis that the figure of the character, as set up in Diderot's Paradoxe sur le comédien, has its source in a curious reversal of the Platonic mimesis. After presenting the main tenets of Plato's reflection on mimesis and of Diderot's theory on character, showing their convergences and contrasts, it is analyzed how such a conceptual turnaround has historically taken place, by establishing a chain of reception from Plato to Diderot passing through Cicero and the Renaissance artists.

Key words. Mimesis, idea, Plato, Diderot, character.

À Florence. Le portail d'une église.
TEBALDEO FRECCIA, s'approchant de Valori — Ah! monseigneur, qu'il est doux de voir un homme tel que Votre Eminence parler ainsi de la tolérance et de l'enthousiasme sacré! […] Trouver sur les lèvres d'un honnête homme ce qu'on a soi-même dans le cœur, c'est le plus grand des bonheurs qu'on puisse désirer.
VALORI — N'êtes-vous pas le petit Freccia?
TEBALDEO — Mes ouvrages ont peu de mérite; je sais mieux aimer les arts que je ne sais les exercer. Mais ma jeunesse toute entière s'est passée dans les églises. Il me semble que je ne puis admirer ailleurs Raphaël et notre divin Buonarotti. Je demeure alors durant des journées devant leurs ouvrages, dans une extase sans égale. Le chant de l'orgue me révèle leur pensée, et me fait pénétrer dans leur âme. […]
LORENZO — Pourquoi remettre vos offres de service? Vous avez, il me semble, un cadre dans les mains.

TEBALDEO — Il est vrai; mais je n'ose le montrer à de si grands connaisseurs. C'est une esquisse bien pauvre d'un rêve magnifique.
LORENZO — Vous faites le portrait de vos rêves? Je ferai poser pour vous quelques-uns des miens.
TEBALDEO — Réaliser des rêves, voilà la vie du peintre.

Alfred de Musset, Lorenzaccio, Act II, scene 2.

«Why has the notion of *mimesis* so deeply characterized the history of the theory of art in Western tradition?»[1]. And which *mimesis*? This paper is an attempt to answer the question posed by the organizers of the conference by reference to a certain "idea of theatre".

Plato is the first who has profoundly explored the *mimetic arts* from a theoretical point of view. By including in this category both poetry and the visual arts, he makes of the notion of *mimesis*, although in a problematic manner, the background of all later thought on art. The controversial status of *mimesis* in the Western history of aesthetics is at the same time indissociable from Plato's ontology. Thus, the articulation of the coupling *mimesis-idea* would mark the modern fate of the general artistic principle of *representation*. This is the hypothesis that I aim to test, through the surprising itinerary of a certain modern reception of Platonism. It concerns theatre, and more precisely one of its central figures: the character. Understood by Diderot, in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien* — «the founding text for the modern reworking of the mimesis question», according to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe ([1986]: 10, trans. mine) —, as the ideal model to which the actor tries to adjust himself — «modèle idéal auquel l'acteur cherche à se conformer» (Diderot [1995]: 73) —, the character in modern theatre would have its source in a curious reversal of the Platonic *mimesis*, whose stages and conceptual issues I will try to specify in this paper.

Yet, such an hypothesis requires, in order to be authenticated, three verifications:

1) First, it must be proved that the *mimetic* scheme applies to what we understand as *theatre*, which in principle is not evident.

Mimesis, in Plato, does not designate the theatrical act as representation or performance. In classical Greek, the word *théatron* ("place for seeing") can designate the building as "place of assembly" (Liddell-Scott [1996], *s.v.*) or, to a minor extent, the scenic dimension of representation[2], but not, as we tend to think, a literary genre. The term *mimesis* is certainly related to dramatic poetry (tragedy and comedy), and it is also true that, in the context in which Plato wrote, the oral and performative dimension was inherent to poetry[3]. But, together with the poet, the painter is equally defined as a *mimetic* artist (*Republic* X, 597b), and also the sophist (*Sophist*, 234e–235a). On the other hand, the actor's art as such is never taken into consideration except for brief references (e.g. *Ion*, 532d, or *Charmides*, 162d, where it appears in a simile).

The same can be said in respect to Aristotle[4]. At the beginning of the *Poetics* we read: «Epic

[1] *Ways of Imitation*, International Conference, call for papers. This paper has benefited from the instructive remarks and reading of Prof. Andrea Capra (University of Milan) and Prof. José García Roca (University of Valencia). My gratitude to them and to Raquel Cascales Tornel, Kathaleen Reidy and Yasmin Syed-Leroy for their help and friendship.

[2] In New Testament Greek, however, it is used with the same meaning as *théama*, "spectacle": «God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world [*théatron egenēthēmen tôi kósmōi*], to angels and to mortals» (*1 Corinthians*, 4:9, NRSV).

[3] G. R. F. Ferrari calls this aspect the «theatricality» of the poetic experience in Plato's time, and states that the concept of *mimesis* basically designates nothing else ([1989]: 92-99). See also Havelock (1986): 79-116, Baldry (1975): 1-2 and Fränkel (1997): 33 *ss*.

[4] For a rigorous state-of-the-art treatment of this question in the double perspective of Plato and Aristotle, see in this issue Andrea Capra's *Mythos and mimesis from Plato to Aristotle*.

poetry and tragedy, as also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation [*pâsai tynchánousin oûsai miméseis tò sýnolon*]» (1447a13-16). In that work Aristotle proposes to speak «not only of poetry in general but also of its species and their respective capacities; of the structure of plot required for a good poem» (1447a8-11). The question of the modes of diction is deliberately put aside, «as appertaining to another art, and not to that of poetry» (*cf.* 1456b8-18). The *mimesis* established in the *Poetics*, as opposed to that of Plato, does not go beyond the frame of the *poetic*, even though the conceptual widening which is operated by Aristotle here may allow us to foresee the tendency to do so.

2) Secondly, it must be proved that Plato's theory has shaped and set up our modern conception of theatrical *mimesis*. And this, too, is not evident. All classical theatrical — and, in general, literary — precepts have unquestionably been influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics* and its conception of *mimesis*. Commentaries such as those of Robertello, Maggi, Varchi, Vettori, Castelvetro, and Scaliger will have a strong influence on the traditional theory of theatre, from the Italian Renaissance to the Spanish Golden Age, and even later on[5].

3) Thirdly, it must be proved that the notion of *character*, at the moment of its emergence in the history of theatre, presents the Platonic scheme in its theoretical configuration. This is also problematic, since the idea of character is equally unknown to both Plato and Aristotle; the *prát-tontas* used by Plato (see *Rep*. X, 603c) as well as by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, meaning "actors" or, more precisely, "(people) acting", can refer, at times indistinctly, to both theatre actors and acting narrators (*cf*. Guénoun [1997]: 21-25). The actor–character distinction does not belong to this phase.

In order to see how this idea has been set up, «let us return» — as Plato's Socrates likes to repeat — «to the beginning» (*Second Alcibiades*, 140d). I will briefly present the most prominent aspects of Plato's reflection on *mimesis*, then I will examine the founding concepts of Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien,* noting his Platonism as well as his differences from it, and in the third place I will attempt to sketch out, following Erwin Panofsky's *Idea*, the main landmarks in this thwarted history — we will see why — which has lead from Plato's theory of *mimesis* to Diderot's thoughts on the character.

1. MIMESIS IN PLATO

The attention that Plato pays to *mimesis* can be seen in many of his dialogues. From the *Cratylus* to the *Laws*, considered in different perspectives, *mimesis* is noticeably scattered across the whole of his work. Even though the notion is designated by certain commentators as «that most baffling of all words in his philosophical vocabulary», it is impossible to understand Plato's critique of poetry unless we come to terms with this notion (Havelock [1963]: 20).

In the sense of "imitation", *mimesis* appears at the beginning of the *Cratylus*, when Socrates and Hermogenes establish that, when the nomothete attributes names to things, he necessarily has, like any other artisan, his eyes fixed on an *ideal model* (389a-e). *Mimesis* shapes up from here on as a hinge between two systems of reality: the object and its image, the imitated thing and that which imitates it, the rose and its name[6]. It articulates them and, at the same time, marks the differ-

[5] Even in order to distance himself from Aristotle's tenets, Lope de Vega has him as his main reference in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609). Aristotle is also the main reference for French Classicism; see *La Pratique du théâtre* (1657) by the Abbé d'Aubignac.

[6] The title of Umberto Eco's famous novel *Il nome della rosa* (1980) has its origin in a variation of a verse in a poem by Bernard of Morval (*c.* 1150)*, De contemptu mundi,* in which Eco changes "Rome" into "rose": «Stat Roma pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus»; a variation that I believe to be derived from the theme of the *Cratylus*. That theme of the name of the rose in Plato's dialogue had also been recalled by Jorge Luis Borges in the first verses of his poem *El Golem*, in *El otro, el mismo* (1964).

ence. This line of meaning will be deepened in the dialogues of Plato's late period (*Sophist, Critias*), where the ontological sense, often pejorative, of "production of a copy," is asserted.

It is, however, in the *Republic* where *mimesis* is most thoroughly examined. That happens in two stages. First, in book III, it serves to designate one of the two modes of saying [*lexis*] of which the poet can make use in the course of a narration [*diḗgēsis*]. He can proceed either by simple narration [*haplêi diēgḗsei*] — which is when «the poet himself is the speaker and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking» (III, 393a) — or using a narration by *mimesis* [*diḗgēsis dià mimḗseōs*], when «he delivers as if he were himself Chryses[7] and tries as far as may be to make us feel that not Homer is the speaker, but the priest, an old man» (III, 393b). This argument will be prolonged throughout the rest of the book to finally conclude by characterizing the mimetic poet as the double or multiple man «capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things» (III, 398a-b); a man who does not have his place in the perfect city of the *Republic*, given that each member accomplishes one sole task.

Later, in book X, after having exposed his theory of Ideas beginning from book VI, Socrates brings back the question of poetic *mimesis*, this time to consider it, as he says, «in general, as a whole» (595c). That leads, in the economy of the dialogue, to a broadening of the mimetic field that includes the art of painting, from which other properties of *mimesis* are deducted. What Socrates derives from painting, or «mimetic art linked to vision», will equally be applicable to poetry, or «mimetic art linked to hearing»:

> *— To which is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears [pròs tò phainómenon, hôs phaínetai]? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?*
> *— Of a phantasm [phantásmatos], he said.*
> *— Then the mimetic art [hē mimētikḗ] is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom [eidolon] (Rep. X, 598b-c).*

Thus, the eminent disjunction is set up: being [*eînai*], and appearing [*phaínesthai*], or *not being* really. The being that participates in appearing is designated by Plato by the generic name of «image» [*eidolon*]. In relation to the Idea, the image is deficient, inauthentic and multiple, and it is so by virtue of *mimesis*. *Mimesis* is therefore what links the image to the real being and, at the same time, what dispossesses the image from the real being: this is what the ontological status of semblance paradoxically means (Vernant [1975]: 136). This distance separating the image from being is segmented by the perceptible object. Socrates expresses it in an ordinal way, building the famous hierarchy of the real which relegates imitation to the third and last rank[8]. The well-known example is that of the three beds: the «Form» or «Idea» [*eîdos*] of bed; the particular bed that the craftsman makes *in the likeness* of the Idea of bed; and the painted bed, which *imitates* the craftsman's bed as it appears to the painter (598a).

Whether it is an exact copy [*eikṓn*] or a simulacrum [*phántasma*] aiming to produce a *trompe-l'œil* effect, the painter's bed is always an imitation of the visible bed produced by the craftsman, and not of the Idea or the essence of bed[9]. The *unreality* of the painted bed explains the capacity of the imitator to embrace everything in his imitation. He *seems* to be able to produce everything, in so far as what he produces *seems to be*. But it *is not*. Here resides the nature, ontologically deceitful, of *mimesis* for Plato.

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[7] In the well-known episode of the first chant of the *Iliad*.

[8] «Three removes from nature», an expression from this point forward associated with *mimesis* and its derivatives and repeated many times along this reasoning: 597e, 599a, 599d, 602c, 605c.

[9] *Eikónes* and *phantásmata* are for Plato particular forms of *eídōla*, and these two are diverse genres of *miméma*ta, not apprehended in their dimension of facts of consciousness, but as objective products of certain types of art (*cf.* Vernant [1975]: 142).

Let us retain two characteristics of the mimetic artist which will then allow the application of this principle to theatre:

1) His aptitude to imitate everything (*Rep*. X, 598b-c).

2) His capacity to pass himself off as the original (*Rep*. X, 599a).

2. THE CHARACTER IN DIDEROT

Let's now consider the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* by Denis Diderot. We can start realizing a fact: the distinction between actor and character does not belong to the ancient Greeks; it is not even present a century before Diderot[10], but was something acquired in the times when he wrote[11].

A certain aesthetic tendency in the 18th century, however, advocated a sensible connection between the actor and the text, which brings him to try to create a fusion with his role by means of a naturalistic type of acting, whose premise is to effectively feel the character's passions[12]. In opposition to the dominant tendency, Diderot radicalizes in his *Paradoxe* the separation between actor and character — which is what gives its paradoxical allure to his proposition: the actor does not confuse himself with the character, he is not him, since he plays him, «et il le joue si bien que vous le prenez pour tel; l'illusion n'est que pour vous; il sait bien, lui, qu'il ne l'est pas» (Diderot [1995]: 77)[13].

Having established this, he next explains why, for the good actor, playing a character is equal to copying an idea, a model that he imitates the best way he knows how. In this, his art does not differ from the art of the painter, the sculptor, the musician, or of any other artist (Diderot [1995]: 52). As well as for Plato, the principle of artistic creation is unique; in Diderot's words, imitation, copy of a model: «Les grands poètes, les grands acteurs, et peut-être en général tous les grands imitateurs de la nature» (Diderot [1995]: 53).

It is, perhaps, in the following passage, which draws a relation between the actor's and the painter's art, that one can feel the effects of a certain Platonism in Diderot[14]:

> *Votre acteur et votre peintre tombent tous deux dans un même défaut, et je leur dirai: «Votre tableau, votre jeu, ne sont que des portraits d'individus fort au-dessous de l'idée générale que le poète a tracée, et du modèle idéal dont je me promettais la copie. Votre voisine est belle, très belle; d'accord: mais ce n'est pas la Beauté. Il y a aussi loin de votre ouvrage à votre modèle que de votre modèle à l'idéal» (Diderot [1995]: 97-98).*

The same distance that separates a beautiful woman from Beauty[15] also separates the actor's

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[10] «On emploie couramment encore acteur pour personnage au XVII[e] siècle français» (Abirached [1994]: 10).

[11] The *Paradoxe sur le comédien* is thought to have been written between 1773 and 1777, although it was not published, posthumously, until 1830.

[12] A tendency defended in *Le Comédien* (1747) by Rémond de Sainte-Albine, and in the booklet *Garrick ou les Acteurs anglais* (1750) by Sticotti, which the character called "The First One" in Diderot's *Paradoxe* explicitly contests.

[13] As Prof. Capra observes, we can appreciate, in the following words of Plato's *Ion*, a similar separation between the actor, on the one hand, and his acting and the effects produced in the spectators on the other: «SOCRATES: Do you know that you rhapsodes also affect the majority of your spectators the same way? ION: I know it very well. I look down from time to time from the stage and see them weeping and gazing up at me fearfully, sharing the astonishment of what is being said. *I have to pay close attention* to them: because if I make them cry, I'll later laugh myself for the money I make, but if they laugh, I'll myself cry for money lost» (*Ion*, 535e, emphasis mine).

[14] In what concerns Plato's influence on Diderot, we know that during his imprisonment in the donjon tower of the Château de Vincennes (1749), Diderot translated the *Apology of Socrates* («j'avais un petit Platon dans ma poche», he later wrote to Sophie Volland while describing this sad sojourn). He also wrote the entry "Socratique" of the *Encyclopédie*, and had in mind the project of a philosophical drama about Socrates' death, which he never wrote, of which a "Socratic scene" is sketched out in *De la poésie dramatique* (1758). *Cf*. Diderot (1978): 237-241; Trousson (1967): 24, 105-124.

[15] We can remark the use here by Diderot of the capital letter ("la Beauté"), following the usage in modern Pla-

acting from the idea of the poet. The actor's talent consists of getting these two poles closer by imitating an ideal model that is — Diderot does not cease to repeat — forged by his imagination, and that evidently corresponds to the character. «Dans ce moment —Diderot says writing about a famous actress of the Comédie Française playing a character of Jean Racine's *Britannicus* — elle est double: la petite Clairon et la grande Agrippine» (Diderot [1995]: 52). In consequence, there is a hierarchical coexistence of the actor with the character.

Let us now see this process of creation of the character as Diderot specifies it, and take notice of its unquestionable Platonic air:

> *Quel jeu plus parfait que celui de la Clairon? […] Sans doute elle s'est fait un modèle auquel elle a d'abord cherché à se conformer; sans doute elle a conçu ce modèle le plus haut, le plus grand, le plus parfait qu'il lui a été possible; mais ce modèle qu'elle a emprunté de l'histoire, ou que son imagination a créé comme un grand fantôme, ce n'est pas elle. […] Quand, à force de travail, elle a approché de cette idée le plus près qu'elle a pu, tout est fini; se tenir ferme là, c'est une affaire d'exercice et de mémoire (Diderot [1995]: 73, emphasis mine).*

Now, to sum up: what is — positively — the character as Diderot understands it? «What is the *truth* of the scene?» is the question that he, through the character called "The First (Interlocutor)" (*Le Premier*) asks himself, and his answer contains what we are searching for: «it is the conformity of the actions, of the discourses, of the figure, the voice, the movement, the gesture, with *an ideal model* imagined by the poet and often exaggerated by the actor» (Diderot [1995]: 80, trans. mine).

In consequence, we can deduce that, in this context:

1) The character is an *ideal model* imagined by the poet.

2) Truth consists of the faithful imitation of this model («the truth of the scene»).

This conclusion sounds scandalous if we think of the Platonic hierarchy mentioned before, where the artist's copy draws away from truth by three degrees. It is as if the Platonic Idea had come down from its metaphysical kingdom and now lived in the imagination of the mimetic artists — precisely the people that Socrates had banned from the *Republic*'s "ideal" city.

3. WHERE IS THE IDEA?, OR CONCERNING HOW WE GOT THERE

In view of the previous analysis, a problem clearly stands out: since Plato's metaphysics seems to make an authentic philosophy of art impossible, how is it possible that all Western aesthetics has been, in a certain sense, inspired by Plato? This is the starting point of Ernst Cassirer's lecture *Eidos und Eidolon* (Cassirer [1924). In it the author remarks that there does not exist, properly speaking, a Platonic aesthetics. The Beautiful, which occupies an essential place in Plato's system, has nothing to do with art. It is something abstract founded on the perfection of the mathematical order and measure. This is precisely the reason why Plato condemns art. This ascertainment is also the starting point of Erwin Panofsky's emblematic work *Idea* (1924), which will serve us as a guide in the backwards search for the surprising offspring of the Platonic *mimesis* in order to understand the movement by which such a conceptual turnaround has taken place.

The first milestone of this history is Cicero. «Cicero, in his *Orator*, […] compares the perfect speaker with an "idea", which we cannot encounter in experience but only imagine, and which in this respect resembles the object of artistic representation» (Panofsky [1924]: 11)[16]. This is how the transition is done. But how is this new interpretation associated to Plato? «Plato […] calls these

tonic literature when referring to an "Idea". In *Greater Hippias* (287e ss.) there is also an echo of this difference between Beauty and something beautiful (a woman in both texts).

[16] It is inevitable to think here of the idea of character that Diderot exemplified in La Clairon.

forms of things *ideas*» (emphasis mine); Cicero writes the word in Greek (*idéas* [ἰδέας]) and then adds: «he [Plato] asserts that they exist eternally, being contained in our reason and our intellect» (Panofsky [1924]: 12). By confining them to the mind, Cicero just opened the door to a non-Platonic, and even anti-Platonic, meaning of idea. The artist — the orator in this case — is thus no longer an imitator of the sensible world in its deceptive aspect; instead, «in his own mind there dwells a glorious prototype of beauty upon which he, as a creator, may cast his inner eye» (Panofsky [1924]: 13).

It is, indeed, from "idea", such as Cicero writes and redefines it, that the term "ideal" derives: a term which replaces the platonic *eîdos* and through which the shift in meaning is consummated, in the extent that the ideal is a confused notion; its ambiguity being due to the fact that it does not belong to the sensible world nor to the intelligible world.

With the Renaissance, a radical mutation in the theory of art takes place. It can be connected with what Aristotle wrote: «art either imitates the works of nature or completes that which nature is unable to bring to completion» (*Physics* II, 8, 199a15-18). On the one hand, art imitates nature. But it will be asserted that, at the same time, art also surpasses nature, correcting and perfecting it with the help of imagination. Combined in a powerful synthesis, one can find the two principles of imitation and perfection in the art of Michelangelo, poetically theorized in his *Rimes*. For the Florentine genius, the properly artistic operation consists of releasing the pure form that lies hidden in the rough block of stone:

Sì come per levar, donna, si pone
in pietra alpestra e dura
una viva figura,
che là più cresce u' più la pietra scema
(Rima LXXXIV, in Buonarroti [1992]: 198-199).

The marble block encloses the form that the artist imagines in his mind among many other possibilities. This «removal of what is superfluous» is carried out by the hand of the artist while obeying his intellect:

Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto
ch'un marmo solo in sé non circonscriva
col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva
la man che ubbidisce all'intelletto
(Rima LXXXIII, in Buonarroti [1992]: 196-198).

In other words, the form is in the marble in potency. The transition to act is guided by an idea (a *concetto*) that the artist has and that guides his manual work, which consists of clearing away all that is superfluous from the block.

Despite the Aristotelian weight carried by this view, already noted by Benedetto Varchi[17], Michelangelo's concept [*concetto*] has the same meaning as *idea*, understood as a representation which freely creates its own object and can therefore constitute a model which allows the creation of external forms.

But let us now take a step forward and move on to Diderot. Understood as what the artist pursues, the «ideal model» in his conception appears to be the transposition of the eidetic device that we have handled when reading Plato: *the idea as a model* becomes, in Diderot's thought about the actor's art, the *ideal model*. But an adjective that Diderot continuously repeats qualifies and specifies these two words: *imagined*. This is where Denis Guénoun notices the flaw: «Diderot's models move in a space that Plato cannot approach: they are imagined» (Guénoun [1997]: 71, trans. mine). However, the vocabulary persists: «la Cléopâtre, la Mérope, l'Agrippine, le Cinna du théâtre, sont-ils même des personnages historiques? Non. Ce sont les *fantômes* imaginaires de la poésie» (Diderot [1995]: 79). Here are the phantoms [*phantásmata*], as a species of image [*eidolon*], established in the

[17] As reported by Panofsky: «the thought that the "idea" of a work of art is present [*energeíai*] in the artist, is just as Aristotelian as the notion that the work of art itself lies locked [*dynámei*] in the stone or wood. It would be "Platonic" (i.e., Neoplatonic) only if an unconditional supremacy of the Idea in relation to the realized work of art were maintained» (Panofsky [1924]: 120-121).

imaginary world of classical theater by a sort of reversed Platonism. This is patent in the hierarchical division of models established by Diderot:

> *Il y a trois modèles, l'homme de la nature, l'homme du poète, l'homme de l'acteur. Celui de la nature est moins grand de celui du poète, et celui-ci moins grand encore que celui du grand comédien, le plus exagéré de tous. Ce dernier monte sur les épaules du précédent, et se renferme dans un grand mannequin d'osier dont il est l'âme (Diderot [1995]: 130).*

Like Plato's three beds in the *Republic* —the Idea of bed, the craftsman's sensible bed and the painted bed—, or the three rings of the magnetized chain in the *Ion* (535e–536d) —the Muse, the poet and the actor—, Diderot establishes for theatre three categories of men, with the great difference that the pyramid has been inverted: situating at its base the man of nature — which for Plato corresponds to the sensible bed —, Diderot places the poet's man or written character at second rank, and over him places the actor's man, at the peak of this hierarchy. In this new system, the «great wicker mannequin» would thus be the character, whose soul is the actor, the artist par excellence.

This conception of the character, with its heritage of reversed Platonism, has exerted a decisive influence on modern thought on theatre:

> *Othello et Hermione contiennent toutes les jalousies qu'on peut répertorier et ils en excèdent tous les cas, un par un […]. Hamlet continuera à préexister à toutes ses incarnations et, par-là, à justifier son statut théâtral, si bien que l'on se trompera chaque fois qu'on voudra l'étudier comme Napoléon, Gandhi ou le fils de la voisine (Abirached [1994] : 21-22, 34 and passim).*

We can therefore very well see that Platonic *mimesis* beats at the very heart of the theory of modern theatre despite the fact that for the traditional theory of classical theatre the indisputable reference is Aristotle's *Poetics* and its *mimesis*. As Guénoun observes:

> *Pour Platon, la mimèsis sépare et oppose l'imitation et ce qu'elle montre (ou prétend montrer), l'icône et l'eidos, l'"image" et l'idée. L'imitation est pour lui hétérogène à ce à quoi elle renvoie sans cesse, et son mensonge s'établit dans sa prétention à ignorer cet écart. C'est Platon sans doute qui construit et met en place la structure du mimétique telle que nous la manipulons aujourd'hui (Guénoun [1997]: 22).*

And this *mimesis*, as Lacoue-Labarthe points out, by its own and proper *stand-in function,* has theatre as its exemplary model:

> *La mimésis théâtrale, autrement dit, donne le modèle de la mimésis générale. L'art, en tant qu'il se substitue à la nature, en tant qu'il la remplace […], produit toujours un théâtre, une représentation. Ce qui veut dire une autre présentation, ou la présentation d'autre chose, qui n'était pas encore là, donnée ou présente. D'où, cela se comprend de soi, le rôle privilégié qu'Aristote accordait au théâtre, et le rôle exorbitant que Diderot accorde au comédien, au grand comédien (Lacoue-Labarthe [1986]: 25).*

Yet, this substitute function of reality attributed to the art which, in the image of theatre, gives the pattern of the general *mimesis* such as is dealt with by Diderot, is well rooted in Plato, in that aspect in virtue of which imitations substitute reality in a deceitful way; otherwise said, in the opposition between *mimesis* and *alētheia.*

The formidable effect is not due to the fact that what is theatrically represented might be false or morally blameworthy. Plato highlights a dimension that is new, incommensurable: that of, borrowing Heidegger's words ([2002]: 18 and *passim*), «the opening up of being». According to this reasoning, imitation implies being other, being several, potentially being everything; and as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe states, referring to Diderot:

> *Pour tout imiter — tout (re)présenter ou tout (re) produire, au sens le plus fort — il faut n'être rien par soi-même, n'avoir rien en propre. Le paradoxe énonce une loi d'impropriété qui est la loi même de la mimésis: seul "l'homme sans qualités", le sujet sans sujet (absent à lui-même, distrait de lui-même, privé de soi) est à même de présenter ou de produire en*

général. Platon le savait très bien: le miméticien est le pire des engeances, parce qu'il n'est personne, pur masque et comme tel inassignable, irrepérable, impossible à fixer dans une fonction qui lui soit propre et qui trouve sa place dans la juste répartition des tâches (Lacoue-Labarthe [1986]: 27; emphasis mine).

Condemning the double or multiple man to ostracism, Socrates nonetheless defines the *model* towards which the actor's art will tend in the centuries to come. The good actor is versatile; he is capable of imitating *everything* (*cf.* Diderot [1995]: 71 and the analysis of Lacoue-Labarthe [1986]: 22). As Diderot states:

Le point important […] ce sont les qualités premières d'un grand comédien. Moi je lui veux beaucoup de jugement ; il me faut dans cet homme un spectateur froid et tranquille ; j'en exige, par conséquent, de la pénétration et nulle sensibilité, l'art de tout imiter, ou, ce qui revient au même, une égale aptitude à toutes sortes de caractères et de rôles (Diderot [1995]: 49–50, emphasis mine).

The aspect itself that Socrates rejects is what fixes the philosophical thought on theatre. Henceforth, theatrical *mimesis* is conceived as a multiplier of being. The seed of the existential conception of theatrical representation (*cf.* Gouhier [1952]: 25-32) is here sowed.

In order to illustrate this reversal, we can observe the functioning of the mirror motive in both authors, placing them face to face:

— But now consider what name you would give to this craftsman […] who makes all the things that all handicraftsmen severally produce […], all plants and animals, including himself, and thereto earth and heaven and the gods and all things in heaven and in Hades under the earth.
— A most marvelous sophist — he said.
— Are you incredulous? — said I […] – Do you not perceive that you yourself would be able to make all these things in a way?
— And in what way?
— […] You could do it most quickly if you should choose to take a mirror and carry it about everywhere. You will speedily produce the sun and all the things in the sky, and speedily the earth and yourself and the other animals and implements and plants and all the objects of which we just now spoke.
— Yes — he said —, the appearance of them, but not the reality and the truth
(Plato, Rep. X, 596c-e).

Au lieu que le comédien qui jouera de réflexion, d'étude de la nature humaine, d'imitation constante d'auprès quelque modèle idéal, d'imagination, de mémoire, sera un, le même à toutes les représentations, toujours également parfait […]: c'est une glace toujours disposée à montrer les objets et à les montrer avec la même précision, la même force et la même vérité (Diderot [1995]: 72-73).

CONCLUSION

This is how we pass, through this unexpected identification, from the Platonic *Idea* to the artistic *representation*; a fabulous destiny, if one ponders it, of this *mimesis* in whose name poets were driven out of Plato's virtuous city and which seemed to invalidate in principle all philosophy of art. It is on this track that I would locate my hypothesis concerning a possible development of this thought on *mimesis* in its modern reception.

However, for what pertains specifically to the thinking about theatre, we can indeed see how the Platonic reflection on *mimesis* has been able to mark — through a chain of reception from Cicero to Diderot, passing through the Renaissance artists — the movement that will bring it, through a turnaround of the meaning of idea, to conceive the character, «a walking abstraction», as Alfred Jarry once said[18] of this ideal entity, intermediate between the letter and the body.

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[18] As reported by Abirached (1994): 187 ss.

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