MAYA NITZAN

THE FICTITIOUS SELF & THE REAL OTHER:

A MANUAL FOR BENIGN LIARS

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PERFORMANCE
PRACTICES**

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SYNOPSIS

The Fictitious Self & The Real Other is practice-based research centered on the embodiment of the other through the act of imitation. The research sets out to rethink an approach to mimesis that maintains contact with revised considerations on its classical lineage while remaining responsive to the current cultural landscape. The research began as a critical response to dominant trends that I identified within contemporary performance art and theater, which while reducing the fictional cosmos, I suspect, have neglected the human capacity to imagine realities other than one's own. It was and still is my stance that fiction – precisely because of its complex status as both different from and like reality and precisely because its imaginative force encourages us to step beyond ourselves towards a world that is not quite familiar to us – can, even if only temporarily, de-habituate the way we perceive our world and renew our engagement with it.

My dissertation project, "A Day in the Life of Mila Harper Blum," was a durational, site-specific multi-media performance that focused on the embodiment of the aging body. Its making-process involved mutual interactions with elderly people in nursing homes across the Netherlands as well as studio practice for altering the performer's body. By imitating the other and situating this act within a pseudo-reality setup,

the research seeks to immerse the performer's body into another. Through this process of transformative becoming, the research questions how mimetic representation can move beyond a mere slavish reproduction of the world to become a performative act that not only describes reality but does something different to our perception of it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DECLARATION

I, Maya Nitzan, hereby certify that I had personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled, *The Fictitious Self & The Real Other*.

No part of the thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma prior to this date.

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INTRODUCTION

TELLING ~~MY~~ HER STORY

"I tell stories; you tell stories. And the reason we have to tell stories is that we are at war"
(Rancière, 2009, 281)

What if you and I and everyone around us are copies? "Copies of what?" you may ask. "Of each other," I would answer – if "I" can indeed hold any meaning, for whatever "I" say is, in some way, a recombination of what others have said before. The proliferation of recent scientific evidence on our innate propensity to imitate confirms what Greek philosopher Aristotle proclaimed long ago: that we, humans, are inherently mimetic creatures. Some modern discoveries have shown that imitation functions not only as a non-trial mode of learning but also as a form of social behavior enhancing interpersonal relations. We imitate to be liked, and we like more when we are being imitated.

Imitation's significant role in both socialization and the formation of subjectivity appears to be consistent with the poststructuralist view of the subject as socially constituted. Thus, American feminist philosopher Judith Butler has used the phrase "a stylized repetition of acts" (1988, 519), and American performance scholar Richard Schechner devises the idiom a "restored behavior" (1985, 36). If these terminologies, among others along this line, suggest the individual's

acquisition of conduct through social transmission; then we may soundly conclude that, in many respects, the self is a hybrid matrix composed of accumulated imitated acts and borrowed ideas stacked together to tell a story. So why not celebrate, with some playfulness, the unoriginal-mimetic creatures that we are?

This research aims to develop an artistic approach, a new embodied technique, if you will, derived from a practice that is perhaps as old as art itself. The practice of imitation has been central to the theater since its inception, but it has lost much of its appeal with the advent of performance art practices as artists began using their own body-self as both material and subject of their work.

Perhaps there were times when the presentation of the self was a strong feminist practice, fighting for the recognition of differences and exposing social injustice. Except now, in the current climate of identity politics, it seems to me that the obsession with self-expression, coupled with the rhetoric of political correctness has produced such a fragmented state of communication. Not only has speaking on behalf of others become off-limits under the risk of cultural appropriation, but speaking with each other has become prohibitory, considering that anything said could be subject to accusations of misogyny or xenophobia. Constantly defining who we are and, thus, who we are not, perpetuates an "us vs.

them" mentality that may adversely affect our intersubjective relations, inciting more antagonism than solidarity.

What I would like to suggest, then, is redirecting the focus from a self-oriented to other-oriented practice; instead of dealing with the biases and prejudices of others towards the self, the performer would have to face those that she may hold about the other. For what I find most troubling and most compelling to confront are not so much the labels that define my own "otherness" as the not-always-pleasant feelings and thoughts that can creep into my embodied mind towards the other.

That being said, the research's hypothesis proceeds from the premise that there are uncharted territories to be explored between certain dominant cultural dichotomies such as self-other, copy-model, representation-presence, and fiction-reality. Seeking deeper insight into the fluidity of these polarized categories may open up new trajectories for retrieving the validity of practices that have been repudiated in the past few decades. By reclaiming the space for imitation, representation, and fiction through the entanglement of their presumably oppositional concepts, I hope to redeem the permission to portray the stories of others both out of and toward a more profound sense of empathy.

With this agenda in mind, the research questions which

strategies destabilize the distinctions between fiction and reality in the practice of embodied imitation.

To answer this question, the research employs a holistic approach centered around the production and reception experience of mimetic representation while contextualizing the proposed embodied technique within the fields of performance art and theater. By reviewing a few historical hallmarks of artistic turning points, I aim to flesh out what I am fighting against and what for and clarify the contribution of my proposed approach to already established doctrines. The "new" approach I am proposing is not intended to serve as a better alternative but rather to add to recent developments, address some of what I perceive as their impasses and, as a matter of fact, utilize a few of their strategies in revising "old" artistic traditions.

Alongside the domain of art, the research has benefited from an intersected dialogue between other divergent discursive fields to foster an interdisciplinary terrain around the themes in question. To give but a few examples, a schema theory from cognitive science assists in addressing questions around the malleability of empirical perception, a philosophical deconstructive approach to semiology provides a substrate for exploring the body as a sign, and a sociological lens substantiates understanding of issues concerning the organization of theatrical experience. I recognize that

bringing a wide range of intellectual spheres into a single, relatively short essay is ambitious and might run the risk of generalization. At the same time, the nature of my research question necessitates a meta- outlook with each chosen theme steered to address a very specific practical concern. The research's creative and scholarly works are mutually constitutive; theory both informs and emerges from practice.

Since this study belongs to research into and through art, in which knowledge is generated not only in its final product but also in its emerging process, a large emphasis is placed on how things have moved. For that reason, I have chosen to design my thesis in a semi-instruction-manual format, with each of the three chapters focusing on one practical phase of the proposed embodied technique, accompanied by visual illustrations. However, it should be clear from the outset that the structural choice of a manual is a self-reflexive nod directed towards my sincere attempt to find a step-by-step program – an ideal model to follow – conceding that such a utopic plan is, at best, speculative. Yet, I see the process of striving toward this unattainable destination as more fruitful than falling into despair before ever trying.

The **first chapter** dives straight into the sea of perplexities in an ongoing attempt to tackle the notion of imitation, focusing on the act of looking, its function, and its risks while asking what it means to look with care. The **second chapter** concerns

the transition from looking at the other to looking like the other, exploring the dynamics between representation and presence in the act of repetition through the notion of likeness. The **third chapter** is devoted to the subject of framing, interrogating the frame's role in the aesthetic domain, particularly with respect to the distinction between fiction and reality, art and life. Alongside the theoretical analysis, specific moments from the experiments conducted throughout the research are used as reference points to specify how the guiding principles presented for each phase manifest in practice. Although more emphasis is placed on the final performance, preceding studio practices done throughout the research are occasionally referenced.

I did my best to make the thesis accessible without shying away from complexity, for my arguments to be simple but not simplistic, suggestive yet instructive. If, at times, you find that I lean towards a more decisive tone, it may be a remnant from my constant struggle to resist the temptation of finding answers and learning to stay within the search, a search I hope you will find as intriguing as I did.

So, without further ado, I invite you – prospective benign liars slash fiction makers – to my (and her) journey.

STEP 1 :
LOOKING AT THE ^{IN}EFFABLE

"in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neigher feel nor understand"
(Coleridge, 2014, 208)

1.1 WHAT DOES LOOKING HAVE TO DO WITH IMITATION?

According to the standard definition, to imitate is to 'learn to do an act from seeing it done' (Hurley & Chater, 2005a, 55). Namely, every act of imitation consists of two acts, first seeing a doing, then repeating the same doing. For that reason, it also necessitates the presence of two agents: the model being observed and the mimic who first observes and then repeats. Without the initial act of looking, one cannot repeat what the other is doing; and the question arises as to whom and what is being imitated.

In scientific studies, what is being imitated usually refers to a certain motoric act or various speech-related variables performed by another person (e.g., facial expressions or rhythm of speech). In a broader sense, imitation can incorporate other behavioral units such as an expression of an idea, emotional state, style, or skill – in short, any information that can be passed from one person to another through a copying procedure.

Dutch social psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis stretches the

definition of imitation further by distinguishing between what he calls "low road" and "high road" imitation (Hurley & Chater, 2005b, 212-213). "Low road" refers to a direct copy of a perceptible behavior like the abovementioned. "High road" refers to an indirect copy of a behavioral pattern activated by primed associations. In the latter extended form of imitation, upon seeing a person act, the observer infers the other's personality traits or social group affiliation; a process of behavioral adjustment ensues, during which the observer's behavior is brought in line with the inference made about the other. Just think, for example, about the change in the pitch of your tone when encountering a baby or the change in the rhythm of your walk when crossing an elderly person in the street. The model in the "high road" is not an individual

person but a group or a type.

Applying the distinction above to the field of performance art, we may say that 'imitation of a type' can be employed to convey social criticism through a satirical embodiment of cultural stereotypes [Figure 1.1]. French theorist Luce Irigaray asserts that by deliberately reappropriating images of femininity built upon patriarchal models, women can "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (1985, 76). Drawing on Irigaray, American literature scholar Elin Diamond suggests "mimicry" as a feminist strategy for "mimesis without a true referent" (1989, 64). This strategy is exemplified in the works of female performance artists who utilized masquerade practices for the sake of ironic citations [Figure 1.2].

Figure 1.1: Studio practice (stereotypes)

Sherman, C. (1977) *Untitled Film Still #6*

Wilson, M. (1974) The Working Girl From *A Portfolio of Models*

Figure 1.2: Inspirational masquerade practices

By parodically manipulating typical images of femininity circulated in Western culture, these performers render visible the gender mask imposed upon women. In doing so, under Diamond's mimicry, identity is foregrounded as a social construct rather than as naturally given; and the category "woman" becomes nothing more than a floating signifier depleted of any fixed referential logic.

Yet, whatever the artist's intentions, the reception outcome cannot be guaranteed. In an unintended reading, the artist's exhibition of feminine stereotypes may be mistakenly understood as reaffirming, rather than undermining, the hegemonic order she attempted to subvert.[1]

Furthermore, under closer inspection, Diamond's "mimesis without a true referent" appears self-contradictory. On the one hand, it implies the presentation of the mask without claiming any truth behind it. On the other hand, how can the mask be foregrounded as fictitious (that is, as a patriarchal construct) if there is no true self behind it? In other words, to single out the mask as alienated from oneself, Diamond implies a self before the mask; and in doing so, she may restate the essentialist model she aims to deconstruct.[2]

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1 A problem I faced myself during the first year's final performance [Figure 1.3].
2 Philip Auslander identifies a similar contradiction in the Brechtian alienation effect, which likewise requires actors to maintain an explicit distance from their roles (1997, 30-34), and from which Diamond, in fact, derives her strategy.

Figure 1.3: Studio practice (Céline)

As an alternative to Diamond's un-making mimesis by annihilating the referent, I suggest re-making mimesis by searching for the referent: Rather than imitating predicted properties affiliated with a particular group, the performer imitates specific individuals who belong to such a group. Instead of criticizing social categories, she dissects them by testing and revising their applications in particular instances. To do so demands that the performer takes the "low road" and, first of all, observes.

1.2 WHY LOOKING IS RISKY?

When I walk around the world, guided by my eyes, it is tempting not to think of my sight as a purely physical-physiological fact, a corollary of light waves greeting my optic nerve system [Figure 1.4]. Since seeing demands no active effort on my part, my visual field feels like what air is to breath – simply there to take in. But therein resides the risk since this seemingly natural-self-evident impression may obscure my ability to recognize what I might not see, what might be passing unnoticed or hidden from sight.
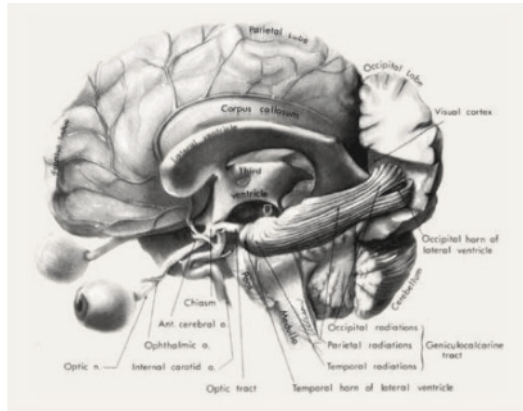
Source: entokey.com

Figure 1.4: Anatomical drawing of the visual-sensory system

You see, the act of looking is not only in the brain; it enacts a relational field, which, in varied contexts, has often been referred to as "the gaze" [Figure 1.5]. In cultural studies, the gaze is understood as a conflicted intersubjective site of power dynamics and ideological negotiations, implicated in the politics of visibility – what is made visible or invisible, by whom to whom, and how (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Therefore, in acknowledging the risk involved in looking, we should ask how it may become an expression of care rather than a violent act; and it is this question that the following sections aim to address.

When first approaching the observation phase, the performer is most likely carrying with her a baggage of expectations largely informed by the ways certain bodies are represented

in her culture. In The Social Construction of Reality (1966), American-Austrian sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann refer to the expectations we carry about others as "typificatory schemes," which determine the patterns whereby "others are apprehended and 'dealt with'" (ibid, 45). These schemes are acquired, in large part, through the "social stock of knowledge" (ibid, 56), namely, through the dominant representational systems that govern one's culture. Therefore, there is always a possibility that when the performer observes the other, she will project her prior expectations onto what she sees; her perceptions, in this case, are filtered through her internalized conceptual repertoire.
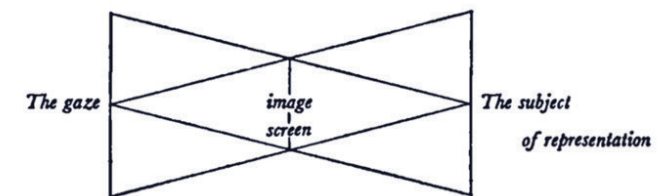
For Lacan, to see is to be seen, yet the image seen is filtered through the screen. When I look at the other, the image of the other is looking back at me through the image I want the other to see.

Source: Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamentals Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973)

Figure 1.5: Lacan's diagram of the scopic field

The influence of our acquired conceptual repertoire on how we come to experience the world can be further elucidated using German philosopher Martin Heidegger's critique of representation.[3] Representation, in Heidegger's view,

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3 My understanding of Heidegger's position relies on Barbara Bolt's Art Beyond Representation (2004).

"does not operate in the paradigm of resemblance, [nor] as a copy of some prior original" (Bolt, 2004, 19). Instead, he conceptualized representation "as a regime or system of organizing the world, by which the world is reduced" to a set of standards or norms (ibid, 18). By reducing things to their identifiable characteristics, representation renders them familiar and habituates the way we experience them. If habituation means that our response to a particular stimulus decreases as a result of prolonged exposure, then it is possible to presume that things that we take up as habits render them less visible.

Following Heidegger, we may say that representation does not reflect reality but, in fact, creates it. Supposing that representation has such a significant impact on shaping how the world appears to us – wouldn't such a state of affairs validate even more the necessity for alternative representations in the reshaping of cultural consciousness? But if the artist, as a representation-producer, is indoctrinated by the 'social stock of knowledge' no less than any other individual in her culture, what exempts her from being caught up in its symbolic order that she may provide an alternative? Given that "signifying practices structure the way we 'look'" (Hall, 1997, 8), should we conclude that the performer cannot see the other beyond the imposed labeling inventory of her culture?

Fortunately, we may not be wholly entrapped by our culture's

signification systems, considering that the mental schemas upon which our embodied mind organizes and makes sense of the world are not utterly fixed but evolve over time through different interactions we have with our environment. The mutability of our mental schemas is one of the main ideas that American neuroscientist Michael A. Arbib and English philosopher Mary B. Hesse advance in The Construction of Reality (1986). According to their theory, schemas are formed and reformed in a "continuing action/perception cycle," during which an immediate sensorimotor experience is transformed into a general pattern they call 'schema assemblage' (ibid, 13). Subsequent experiences are then tested against the "anticipations generated within the schema assemblage" (ibid, 57), such that when a certain experience is incompatible with prior anticipations, the relevant schemas are revised accordingly [Figure 1.6].
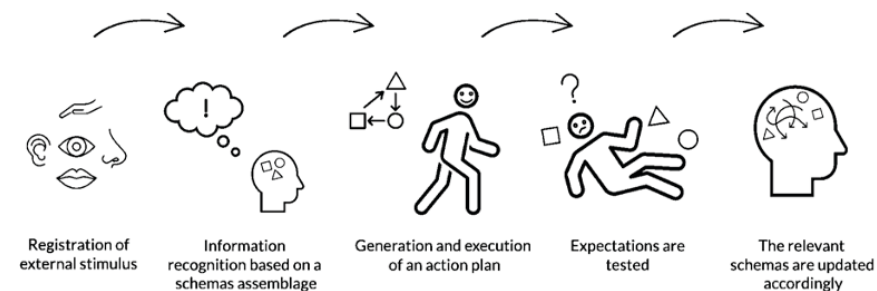
Figure 1.6: A diagram of an action/perception cycle

Provided that this theory is correct, the performer can surmount, at least partially, her culture's labeling inventory by entering into 'a continuing action/perception cycle.' Applying this interactive cycle to our concern with modes of looking, we may say that reciprocal interactions with others can bring us closer to what looking with care possibly means. In contrast to "remote" interactions, Berger and Luckmann argue that "it is comparatively difficult to impose rigid patterns upon face-to-face interaction" (1966, 44). While any intersubjective communication will be patterned by 'typificatory schemes,' these patterns will be more vulnerable to interferences and negotiations over the course of direct interactions [Figure 1.7].

Figure 1.7: Studio practice (Debbi) – The models were extracted from 'remote interactions'

Creating opportunities for ongoing mutual engagement is promising not only for ethical reasons in allowing the other to look back but also for granting access to experience with full modality where all senses are activated. After all, bodies are more than the eyes can see; and the visual field, although valuable, cannot be the only means through which information about others is processed.

1.3 HOW TO LOOK OTHERWISE?

The intersubjective zone is abundant with information, and there is a limit to how much one can absorb. To intensify the susceptibility of my receptiveness and openness to modifying already acquired dispositions – during my engagement with the other, I actively sought moments that exceeded my expectations. This vigilant search for the unexpected was especially beneficial as I became more accustomed to and familiar with my new environment. The things I witnessed were sometimes small, like the two hands strangely resting motionless on a table with the palms parallel to each other, or the hesitant glimpse into a cup before it meets a half-open mouth, or the tiny moment during the transition from standing to sitting when the body is no longer able to maintain stability and suddenly succumbs to the force of gravity.

To avoid the temptation to impose interpretations onto what I perceived, I tried to attune my attentiveness to the aesthetic qualities of my experience. By that, I am referring to the word

"aesthetic," as coined by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in the mid-18th century. The etymology of the word "aesthetic" comes from the Greek aisthētikos meaning 'to feel' or 'to sense.' Baumgarten's use of the term designates the "sphere of immediate and particular sensory cognition, as opposed to the general, abstract forms of conceptual or intellectual cognition" (Halliwell, 2002, 9). When treating my encounter through an aesthetic lens, I looked at things not for their meaning but for their affective force.

To elucidate what I mean by looking through "aesthetic eyes," we can take the face as an example. The face usually functions as an instrument whose purpose is to convey meaning, to express the subject's interiority, or to stand in for something hidden behind it [Figure 1.8] In What Can a Face Do?, English

Source: Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1859)

Figure 1.8: Samples from Darwin's chart of facial expressions

film scholar Richard Rushton takes a Deleuzian turn and tries to examine what happens if we "disembody the expression on the face;" if we "take the facial expression in-itself" as "a pure quality" (2002, 224). From this perspective, instead of representing the emotions or thoughts of the face's owner, the face already "incorporates as part of itself the very feeling or idea" we perceive (ibid); the question then becomes not what the face represents but what it does.

Let me share a personal experience to speculate how Rushton's conceptualization of the face may work in practice: In one of the nursing homes I visited, there was a woman with dementia. Due to our language barrier and her cognitive condition, we could not communicate verbally. She would speak to me, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Yet there were times when her face did something; they doubled like a cell dividing into two during mitosis; and for a moment, I had her face on me. I cannot explain what the expression of this face was, nor can I convey the feelings it rendered beyond this uncanny image. Whatever her face did, it moved my body; and I found myself crawling under her skin.

How to look with care perhaps means the observer acknowledges the agency of the observed. During her encounters, the performer will confront the image she held, thus far, about the other, allowing this image to reshape

and shift. What the performer is looking at, then, is not the model, per-se, nor the mere mental image informed by her 'typificatory schemas;' rather, it is the relation between the two – a relation that she cannot literally see but can still sense. With a careful look, the performer will try to operate her body like a multi-sensorial camera and record moments with the sensations they evoked, which she can later replay in her mind. In the subsequent phases, when entering the studio or practicing at the performance site, she will close her eyes and renew the somatic memories etched in her body from the time and place of that encounter.

STEP 2 :
MASKING THE BODY ^{BEYOND} APPEARANCE

"A reacehorse is more different from a workhorse than a workhorse is from an ox"
(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 257)

2.1 WHY REPRESENTATION IS BAD?

To appear like the other, I repeat how the other appears to me. On the surface, this logic echoes the long-lasting tradition of realism that has endured with all its multiple, sometimes incompatible, manifestations throughout the history of Western art. If by repetition of appearance, I simply mean copying the model in terms of visual fidelity – as realism is colloquially understood – then I'm in big trouble. Different anti-realistic movements have long disqualified this outmoded idea about perceptual resemblance: first during modernism under the critical position of formalism whose main concern was the exploration of artistic forms (as exemplified in the abstract so-call non-representational art); and later in postmodernism when the relation between reality and its representation utterly collapsed, as expressed in critical discourses encapsulated under the rubric of "the crisis of representation."[4]

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4 I use the terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" roughly according to the periodization of American literary critic Fredric Jameson (1991), but more than a thorough historical survey, my intention here is to unpack a dominant trend of thought around the problem of representation pertaining to both periods even as each has responded to it quite differently.

In both cases, the implied objectivism of realistic modes of representation and their dependencies on a model that is assumed to exist out there "as some pre-existing static reality which the copy then imitates" have become highly contested (Bolt, 2004, 16). The skepticism towards mimesis, particularly in its realistic modalities, expresses a general loss of trust in representation's capacity to represent reality. While the sources of this suspicion are varied across and within different discourses, they may be attributed, in part, to a growing belief that cultural codes generate the conventions of what signifies reality. Under this view, the realistic impression of the mimetic artwork is assessed not in relation to reality but in relation to the system of representation governed within a particular culture during a specific historical moment (Goodman, 1968). Consequently, any claim of correspondence between reality and its representation is seen as the result of prescribed models reflecting ideological interests.

What is at stake here is the very notion of a "referential truth," which becomes to be viewed as nothing more than a regulatory system intended to serve competing social powers.[5] By passing as an "objective" representation of reality (that is, "life-like"), the mimetic artwork reinforces and validates the "truth" (that is, the status-quo) of the reality it purports to

represent. Mimesis, in this light, allegedly "posits a truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image or, in semiotic terms, referent and sign, in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness" (Diamond, 1989, 58). The reduction of difference in favor of sameness is perhaps another way of saying that, since the copy is assumed to be predicated upon a pre-existing model, it presumably exhibits the same attributes that all other particulars under its conceptual category are expected to possess. Therefore, mimesis inevitably leans towards an abstraction in which heterogeneity is replaced by homogeneity.

The predicament posed by mimetic representation has been addressed in the fields of theater and performance art by at least two major artistic approaches, which I very briefly sketch as follows: The first, mostly identified with modernism, has strived to replace representation with presence by unmasking the performer's body and foregrounding its materiality as a 'locus and epitome of the real' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 147). If representation is associated with mediated access to the world controlled by prescribed norms, under this approach, presence is seemingly cut off from any ideology by its very immediacy.[6] The second approach, mostly identified with postmodernism, has taken issue with the first's implied redemptive belief "that ideological and cultural codes may

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5 Such view can be found, among others, in Roland Barthes' reading of popular culture and Michel Foucault's analysis of discourses (Hall, 1997).

6 In the following chapter, I continue discussing this approach from a different perspective.

be transcended" (Auslander, 1997, 93). This approach denies access to presence and celebrates absence by accentually masking the performer's body, casting it as an encoded sign with no truth lying behind the mask.[7] It appears to me that both approaches imply that presence and representation are incompatible: either presence can be cut off from representation, or all we have are representation with no presence.

Now, whether "presence" and "representation" are seen as oppositional or mutual ultimately depends on the respective definitions of these terms. For the sake of discussion, we can theoretically define the two terms as separate, but in practice, as we shall see, this separation becomes less definitive. "Representation" can be broadly understood as a system of significations for the production and exchange of meaning that forms a relation of substitution, whereby a sign 'stands in place of' a worldly phenomenon. For example, the letters C-A-T "signify the four-legged furry animal with whiskers" (Phelan, 1993,149) [Figure 2.1]. "Presence" can be understood as an experience that is "immediately present to consciousness and, hence, [does] not require any semiotic mediation" (Nöth, 2003, 11). For example, the feeling in my palm when caressing the four-legged-furry-animal-with-whiskers.

How to draw a cat?

Source: Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1984)

Figure 2.1: Iconic representation of a cat

In this chapter, I aim to refute arguments against representation as presuming fixity by exploring the dynamic presence afforded within it. In doing so, I hope to address accusations against mimesis as being a repressor of potential differences and to demonstrate mimesis's capacity to bring differences to the fore precisely through "the same" that is never one. My purpose here is not to defend mimetic representation for what it is but to ask what other possibilities might run through it beyond what has come to be expected.

2.2 WHY REPRESENTATION IS NOT SO BAD?

French philosopher Jacques Derrida's différance can serve as a point of departure in our exploration. Différance is "neither a word nor a concept;" it is a slippage, a misspelling – a instead of e – that compounds the words "differ" and "defer" (Derrida, 1972, 7-8). Différance designates the idea (or, better say, the

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7 The feminist masquerade practices discussed in the previous chapter are a case in point.

event) by which any phenomenon bears its meaning (i.e., becomes available to consciousness) not in and of itself but through its difference from "what it is not" (ibid, 13), even if the difference remains unarticulated – "a silent play" (ibid, 5). In other words, no present moment is independent of past memories or future plans; there is no pure presence, since the present is always contaminated by traces from another place and time. As far as I can tell, Différance doesn't deny presence in favor of absence; rather, it posits the two as interdependent. Hereby, Derrida dissolves the reductive binary opposition between the superiority of presence as real and the inferiority of representation as artificial reproduction of the real in the absence of the referent.

When representation is contrasted with presence, it is no longer perceived as that which brings the present again (and anew), as the prefix "re-" has it. Instead, representation in this oppositional format becomes a lack of presence, an absence. But if representation refers to a condition in which one thing stands in place of another, then, well, something must be present. The thing that is present (the sign) brings into mind the absence of something else (the referent), whose "real" presence lies elsewhere. In this light, representation is, in fact, a double presence coupled with absence: at once, the presence of the sign and the presence of the absent referent. The latter is brought into presence in a different mode; different, we may say, from its "original presence."

But if we agree with Derrida that "every presence contains in itself the trace of an absence" (Banerjee, 2021, 2), then the "original presence" itself is ever 'differed-deferred,' with each presence pointing to an elsewhere. Therefore, the very act of trying to "arrest" the "original presence" is doomed to fail; and it is this failure to stand in place of the "original" that I find so constructive in the practice of imitation.

When I use my body to represent another body, not only is my body present, but the absence of the other's body is also present. Unlike the material presence of my body, although masked, the presence of the other's body is absent yet felt. With the notion of *différance* in mind, we may say that the felt presence of the other's body appears as a trace, a memory, or an imagination of a possible reality. We can therefore call the presence of the absent body – "the ghost of the double." Since my body at that moment is masked, it can be argued that my body is not "purely present," at the very least, not in the same way it is usually presented. My body doesn't appear as it were; it undergoes modifications in order to appear more like the other; in a sense, 'I'm not me, not-not me.'[8] Neither the other's body nor mine is purely present, but each engulfs and haunts the other.

Before interrogating the potential effect of this mutual

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8 See Schechner's "liminal realm of double negativity" (1985, 97).

haunting, I would like to take a little detour and examine what modifications my body needs to go through in order to be "possessed" by the ghost of the double; that is to ask, how the presence of the other's body (the referent) can be felt through my body (the sign).

2.3 HOW TO REPEAT THE PRESENT
WITH A GRACEFUL FAILURE?

We can begin by dividing the act of repetition into three crud elements: the gesture, the voice, and the guise. While the first two refer to the physical and vocal reconfigurations of the performer's body, the third includes the exterior appliances (make-up, outfits, wigs, etc.) attached to her body. However, there is another element that we should add to this formula, one that is more elusive, and which lingers throughout the three. This fourth element emanates from the apparent but also exceeds it; following art historian Ernst Gombrich, we may call it a "physiognomic quality."
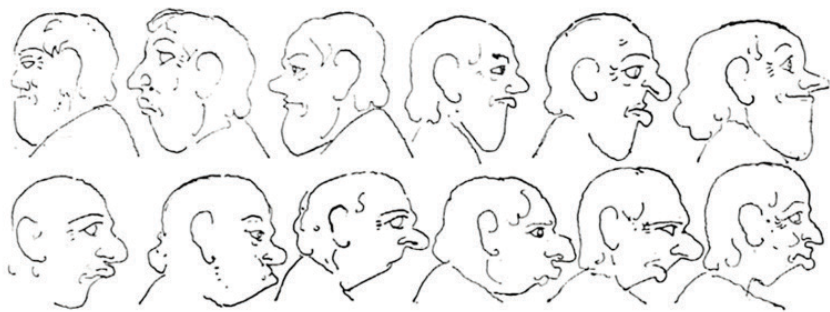
Source: Rodolphe Töpffer's *Essay du physiognomie* (1845)
Retrieved from Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1984)

Figure 2.2: Physiognomy in caricature

In The Mask and the Face (1973), Gombrich describes physiognomy as a unique signature tone carved out of variable factors that, in interaction, make for the person's distinctive quality – which some may refer to as her "character." How a person looks, moves, and sounds is more directly perceptible matter to grasp than the person's physiognomy. To explain how this slippery quality might be captured and translated into an image, Gombrich examines the art of caricature [Figure 2.2]. This type of art only serves as a heuristic tool to speculate how a sense of likeness can be evoked without necessarily relying on an elaborated, so-called "realistic" portrayal. That the person remains identifiable despite the image's simplification indicates, according to Gombrich, that some vital impression of the person's physiognomy passes through the image not so much by means of visual resemblance but of something else.

Alluding to German philosopher Theodor Lipps's empathy theory, Gombrich hypothesizes that the particular impression of a person's physiognomy and its transference to an image is closely linked to the automatic muscular response we, humans, have to forms. The sense of likeness is, therefore, not only an optical matter but also, by extension, kinesthetic [Figure 2.3].
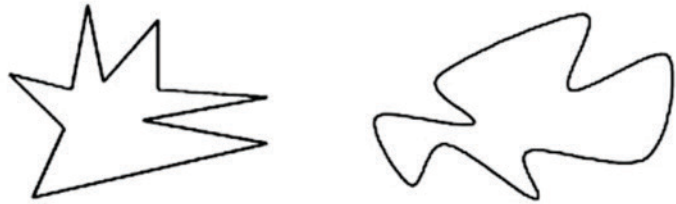
This well-known experiment showed that people are inclined to similarly match shapes and sounds regardless of their spoken language, suggesting hard-wired intersections between different senses.

Source: V.S. Ramachandran's and E.M. Hubbard's
Synaesthesia — A Window Into Perception, Thought and Language (2001)

Figure 2.3: Bouba/Kiki effect

The concept of empathy was first introduced within the context of aesthetic experience through its German equivalent, Einfühlung, whose literal meaning is 'feeling into' (Curtis, 2014, 356). For Lipps, Einfühlung denotes the experience of imaginatively projecting oneself onto the thing perceived, "not as something imaginatively added on to the object, but as something emanating from it" (ibid, 359). It is as though the aesthetic features are transported into the perceiver's body such that one feels oneself compelled to move with the object of perception [Figure 2.4].

The somatosensory resonance of Lipps's Einfühlung, upon which Gombrich derives his theory of likeness, has recently received empirical reinforcement. In the mid-90s, cognitive neuroscientific studies discovered what are called "mirror

The direction of the arrow's tail affects the perception of the line's length, with the left appearing wider than the right, even though both are equal in size.

Retrieved from Ernst Gombrich's *The Mask and The Face* (1973)

Figure 2.4: Müller-Lyer's optical illusion

neurons," which are activated both when an action is performed by oneself and when the same action is observed while being performed by another agent (Iacobon, 2009). In other words, mirror neurons provide the underlying explanation of the biological mechanism linking a visual input with a corresponding motor output. These findings suggest the existence of latent imitation, a kind of inner simulation simultaneously reenacted in one's embodied mind when observing another [Figure 2.5].
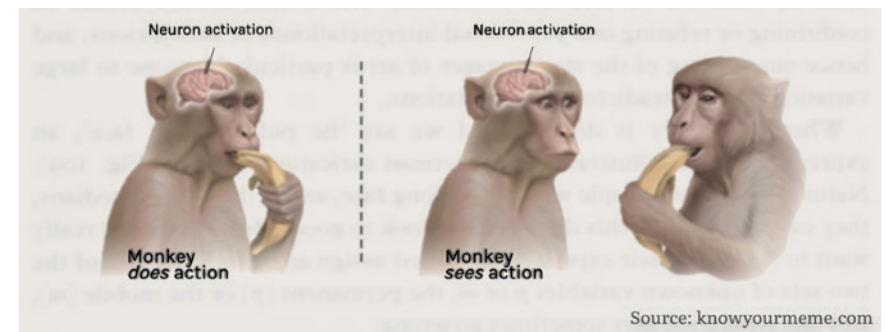
Figure 2.5: Activation of brain regions during execution and observation

To the extent that perceptions and actions share a common neural coding, one can say that I had already begun to imitate inwardly when I was observing the model. Yet, translating into an image what Gombrich calls "physiognomic quality" cannot be predicted; it must be tested through a process of 'trial and error' of 'match and mismatch,' for even the slightest change in the image can affect the whole physiognomic impression [Figure 2.6].
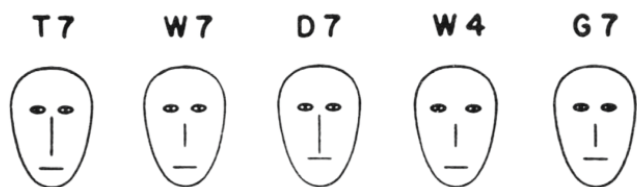
Samples from Egon Brunswik and Lotte Reiter's schematized face experiment (1937)

Retrieved from Ernst Gombrich's *The Mask and The Face* (1973)

Figure a2.6: Minor variables affecting the physiognomic impression

This is one of the physiognomy's great enigmas: it is abstract yet not generic; it lurks on the edge of appearance but cannot be reproduced by mere visual resemblance. Translating it into an image has less to do with comparing the appearance of shape A and shape B and more to do with the affective resonance emanating from the two [Figure 2.7].

Assuming that during my observation phase, I was able to perceive the model's physiognomy through what I call "aesthetic empathy" – and here I couple Baumgarten's

aisthētikos mentioned earlier with Lipps's Einfühlung – perception alone doesn't guarantee that I can repeat it. To find a form for the formless, to transfigure my sensorial memory of the other's body onto my own, demands ceaseless negotiation. When I practiced in the studio, I had to segment my body into pieces, like a collage, trying different combinations and reconfigurations of gestures, voices, and guises until I could reach the best approximation that was always not-quite-yet. Even then, when I thought that, here, I got it, I have it, it's there, a moment later, it again threatened to disappear. With no moment of arrival, only a constant movement of 'disjunctions' and 'conjunctions' between my masked body and the ghost of the double I was trying to seize, ever striving for the same that always already opens to the interval [Figure 2.8].

Figure 2.7: Studio practice (Rose) – experimenting with one-to-one shapes' correspondence

Since the other's body and my body are physically and otherwise different, no matter how hard I try, all my attempts to appear like the other will inevitably be incomplete; there will always be a gap that sets us apart, exposing my anticipated failure to become the same as the other. Appearing like the other is, therefore, not synthesizing two bodies into one but drawing attention to their differences within not-quite-yet the same.

French Philosopher Paul Ricœur argues that "To speak of one thing in terms of another which resembles it is to pronounce them alike and unlike," inhabiting a tension between 'remoteness' and 'closeness,' between 'proximity' and 'distance' (1979, 131). Within this tension potentially emerges what I believe to be the dynamic presence of mimetic representation. In this respect, mimetic representation not only (if ever) reproduces "sameness," but it does something. What it does is provide an opportunity to enlarge our understanding of the other by testing, refining, and questioning the schema assemblage upon which our comprehension of the world rests, whether the masked body pacifies or whether it disrupts the ghost of the double.

Figure 2.8: Studio practice (Mila) – experimenting with affective resonance through outfit

STEP 3 :

DE-STABILIZING THE FRAME

*"Truth still ives on in the midst of deception, and from the copy the original
will once again be restored"*
(Schiller, 1794, Letter IX)

We arrive at the final phase. The question "Who imitates whom?" is now supplemented with the question, "For whom the imitation is intended?" Thereon is produced a third agent – the spectator, whose position is ostensibly identical to that formerly occupied by the performer when she began her journey. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two viewing experiences, for the spectator is not looking at the actual model but at a mimetic representation. The question is begged: If the real thing is already accessible to us, why go through all the troubles of imitation instead of simply bringing the model itself onto the stage?

Undoubtedly, there is more than one answer to this question, but one I already suggested when discussing the inevitable gap. Recall the gap attests to representation's failure to repeat the "original presence," and within this failure, opened up a space of negotiation with the potential to expose the difference in not-quite-yet the same. Towards actualizing this potentiality, in this chapter, I examine how the gap can be brought into focus by considering the frame in which the act of imitation is situated.

3.1 WHY FRAMES ARE IMPORTANT?

When we approach a work of fiction, be it a novel, a film, or a play, we are most likely to acknowledge it as such, even though it is rarely explicitly stated. Our interaction with a work of fiction rests on a tacit agreement to take what is presented to us "not seriously," which is to say, independently from our own world. Nevertheless, our encounter with the fictional world takes place within our own world, and this encounter can be said to be real to the extent that we are being affected by it. Insofar as fiction has actual consequences – cognitively, psychologically, physiologically – it cannot be easily detached from reality.

That fiction can deeply affect us has unsettled many theorists with the problem that has come to be known as the "Paradox of Fiction." English philosopher Colin Radford was the first to spell-out this paradox in his seminal essay *How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?* (1975). In his essay, Radford presents a triad of propositions, each soundly plausible on its own, but when put together, they reveal an inconsistency: (1) The first proposition states that to be genuinely moved by something, we must believe this something exists; or, at the very least, that it is probable; (2) The second states that fictional entities and events can genuinely move us; and (3) The third is that we don't believe fiction is real. Considering these premises together, the question arises:

If we can only be moved by what we believe is or could be real, how can we be moved by what we believe to be fiction when we don't believe fiction is real?

Various commentators have proposed different solutions to reconcile this paradox, all of which may be valid on some occasions, and perhaps no single explanation can account for the full range of our affective responses to the varied mediums and genres of fiction. However, today it is widely held that belief in the actuality of the intentional object is not a requisite for having emotions or feelings towards it, which dissolves the entire paradox (Stecker, 2011). Yet, I don't think that the question of belief should be dismissed so readily. Even if we may be moved by counterfactual phenomena, surely our belief has some ramifications on the nature of our responses. Despite conflicting opinions in the paradox debate, virtually all accounts that I reviewed share one agreement: our affective responses to actual events differ in several respects from those we have to fictional events.[9]

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9 Radford (1975), B.J. Rosebury (1979), Howard O. Mounce (1980), and Alex Neill (1993) argue that our responses to fiction are typically shorter in duration and less intense than our responses to an actual equivalent. Rosebury adds that our response to fiction is also "more rarely accompanied by psychosomatic symptoms" (1979, 129). Neill adds the pleasure or the aesthetic appreciation that accompanies our other emotions. Robert Stecker (2011) points out the ability to maintain a distance, even as we undergo strong emotional reactions. Most, if not all, agree that in our engagement with fiction, we are not disposed to act upon our emotions, at any rate, not in the same manner we do in real life due to the ontological gap between the two worlds. This fact made Kendall Walton (1978) suggest that the difference in our reactions is not of degree but of kind.

The question of belief becomes more pressing, if we consider the fictional world's referential status; for a work of fiction is not necessarily based on a figment of the artist's imagination; it can also be found on a factual counterpart or a plausible logic that is compatible with the real world. According to British classicist Stephen Halliwell, there are two ways of thinking about mimesis, as a "world-reflecting" and as a "world-creating" (2002, 23). The main difference between the two lies in the referential status of the world represented; the former refers to an actual model (e.g., Napoleon), whereas the latter to an imaginary one (e.g., a unicorn). Between those two polarities, there is a spectrum of variations (e.g., Napoleon rides on a unicorn). But I think variations might be all there is since the two ends of the spectrum cannot be mutually exclusive.

If we accept the axiom that two things cannot be exactly the same - for otherwise, they will become one and the same thing - it must follow that any act of reproduction, however "truthful," entails a degree of creative production (e.g., no matter how close the portrait is to Napoleon, we will never confuse a painting with a French emperor for the same reason that a painting of a pipe is not a pipe [Figure 3.1]).

By the same token, if we also accept the axiom that nothing comes from nothing, then the inverted logic also follows.

Source: Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993)

Figure 3.1: A digital copy of a printed copy of a drawing of a painting of a pipe

American philosopher Nelson Goodman argues that worldmaking "always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (1978, 6). If every making is built upon what is already there, then every production, however creative, involves some degree of reproduction (e.g., take a horse and stick a horn on its forehead, and lo and behold, you have a unicorn).

Therefore, what we are facing is not 'imitation based on a replicated model' versus 'fiction based on a creative imagination' but a spectrum ranging from the relatively 'world-reflecting' to the relatively 'world-creating' [Figure 3.2]

Figure 3.2: Studio practice (Kimberly) - relatively world-creating

To further complicate matters, Danish Film scholar Torben Grodal argues that it is a mistake to think of an individual work of fiction as having "a fixed reality-status" considering that it is composed of different elements, each of which can "have a reality-status of its own" (1997, 34). A visual image whose content is imaginary has elements like colors and shapes that are "identical with the elements that would have resulted from seeing in real life;" namely, they trigger "the same neuronal firing patterns as when we see these phenomena in a non-image world" (ibid, 76-77). At the local level, these elements do not stand for something else; the color red or the round shape are not representations of redness or roundness; they are instances of red and round.

If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck (or a rabbit - depends on how you look at it...) [Figure 3.3]. Considering that the fictional world can affect me regardless of my belief, that its referential status is subject to variations, and that it is constructed by elements analog to the real world - should I conclude that nothing in the fictional world makes it different from the real world? Or worse, that reality itself is fiction?

That fiction structures much of our reality is an idea that can be traced far back to Plato's allegory of the Cave and more recently to Lacan's The Symbolic and Baudrillard's Simulacra – to mention only a few – though each thinker presents this

Source: Joseph Jastrow's *The Mind's Eyes* (1899)
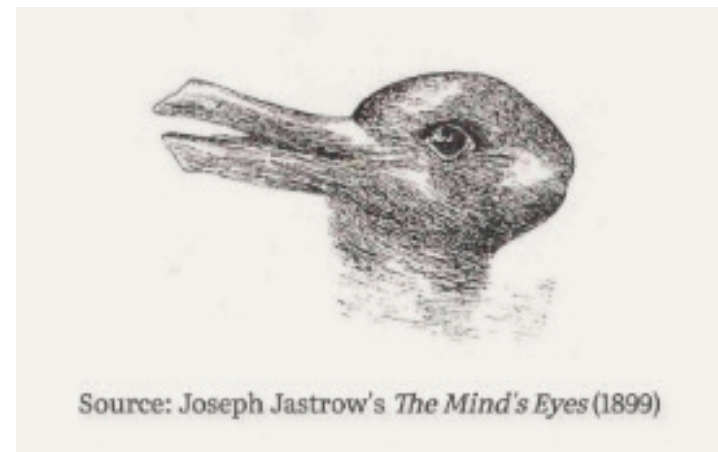
Figure 3.3: A duck or a rabbit?

idea entirely different. Among those thinkers is the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who argues that homo-sapiens can cooperate flexibly and on a mass scale, unlike any other animals on this planet, due to their distinctive ability to invent fictional stories and believe in them collectively. "As long as everybody believes in the same fiction, everybody obeys and follows the same rules, the same norms, the same values" (TEDGlobalLondon, 2015). Owing to this shared imagination, humankind has created religions, states, nations, borders, legal systems, human rights, currencies, and corporations. None of those inventions, Harari claims, are part of the "objective" reality, but an over-layer constructed by humans over the centuries.[10]

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10 "Objective" is understood under Harari's treatment as the perceived material level of reality conditioned by the human organism – a definition one can definitely argue with.

All the above mental juggling was to show that fiction and reality are not competing worlds; they co-exist, muddled within each other to such an extent that differentiating one from the other is, to say the least, a messy business. If I distinguished between the two, it was to make their entanglement intelligible. And yet, there is a common sense of what we mean by "a work of fiction." After I eliminated any other possibility I could think of, I am left to conclude that it must be the frame that establishes our shared understanding of fiction as such. Indeed, the potential to confuse these "two worlds" is perhaps what makes the frame so indispensable.

3.2 WHY SOME CONTEMPORARY ARTS DO NOT LIKE FRAMES?

In *Frame Analysis* (1986), American sociologist Erving Goffman defines "frame" as the overall operational mechanism responsible for organizing an experience according to a set of conventional rules. The frame guides the individuals' interpretation, designates specific roles, and provides temporal and spatial brackets that mark a particular activity off from the rest of the ongoing stream of everyday life. Consider, for example, the framing conventions of the Western theatrical frame: The spatial bracket is marked by the physical stage arena, separating the territory between those who act and those who observe; the temporal bracket is marked at the beginning and the end by the rising and falling of the curtain, respectively. The dramatic play belongs

to what Goffman calls a "transformed activity," a strip of activity patterned after a model already meaningful in its own rights (ibid, 43-44). Once transformed, the activity is given a different status from the model it is patterned after. Thus, the theatrical frame prompts us to see the actor's body as a fictional character and the fictional character as if it were a real person [Figure 3.4].

Source: Richard Schechner's *An Introduction to Performance Studies* (2020)
Figure 3.4: Schechner's classification of social frames

Traditionally, at least since the 18th century, the aesthetic frame was conceived as facilitating a certain distance that cuts off the object from its usual context and transforms it into a source of pleasure and contemplation. This idea of distancing
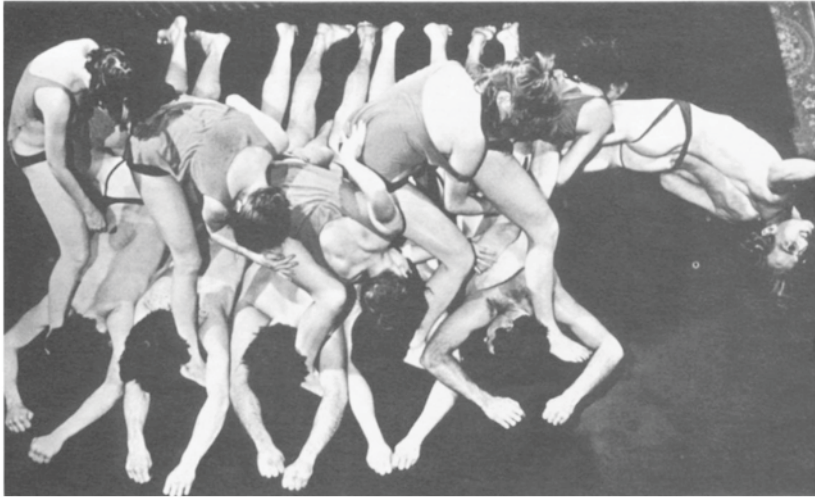
can be found in English scholar Edward Bullough's discussion of "Psychical Distance" (1912), but it can be traced further back to German philosopher Immanuel Kant's "disinterested delight."[11] For Bullough, the ideal condition for aesthetic appreciation is an "utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance" (ibid, 94). This theorem posits that the loss of distance (and, with it, the loss of aesthetic appreciation) is a consequence of either under- or over-distance. The first results from the subject's over-identification with an object whose impression is "too close" to reality, and the second results from the subject's under-identification with an object whose impression is "too far" removed from reality. While the artwork's conceptual content may hold some relation to reality, under Bullough's principle of distancing, the artwork is set apart from any pragmatic implications upon reality.

According to German critic Peter Bürger (1984), the view of art as a distinct sphere of experience culminated during the late 19th - early 20th centuries when the idea of "art for art's sake" became valorized. Then came the historical avant-garde (e.g., Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Readymade), followed by the neo-avant-garde (e.g., Pop-Art, Happening, Fluxus), and the notion of art's autonomy has started to become the

subject of intense scrutiny. If, before, art had distanced itself from life and had no practical interest in impacting social reality, the avant-garde movements attempted "to reintegrate art into the praxis of life" with the aim to make this impact possible (Bürger, 1984, 22). Bringing art back to life meant to break the conventional rules, not only in terms of formal or thematic innovations but also with an attack on the institution of art itself, which, in part, meant breaking the aesthetic frame responsible for the separation.

This gesture of the avant-garde exerted influence over the theatrical frame, which during that time was undergoing radical transformations. Theater practitioners as diverse as Bertolt Becht, Antonin Artaud, and Jerzy Grotowski, among many others, have strived, each in their own way, to eliminate pretense and dispel illusion by substituting the "there and then" of the dramatic play with the "here and now" of the theatrical event. Correspondingly, the "fourth wall" separating the proscenium stage from the darkened auditorium had been abolished, and the spatial-temporal dimension of the stage was no longer separate from the one inhabited by the spectators. Instead of representing fictive characters in a fictive world, the theater began to present real bodies acting in real time and space [Figure 3.5].

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11 To my knowledge, Kant does not explicitly use the term "distance," but his idea of disinterestedness resonates in some respect with Bullough. Yet, I choose to focus on the latter's text since Kant's formulation requires an extended discussion than necessary for my purpose.

The Performance Group (1969) *Dionysus in 69*

Figure 3.5: Real bodies acting in real time and space

Despite the exciting changes inaugurated by the avant-garde's aspirations to break the frame – the frame, like a phoenix, nevertheless kept reemerging from burned ashes. Undoubtedly, borders have been expanded, and rules have become more flexible; but the fact is that there remains a sphere we call "art" and another we call "life" (even if the question of what belongs to what occasionally becomes open to dispute). Insofar as we – recipients, participants, producers, judges of taste – are invited to consider what we perceive as a work of art, no matter how much art is pushed toward the quotidian, the ostensibly non-artistic realm, the frame that denotes it as "other-than-life" will not disappear. For wouldn't fully absorbing art into life result in art's disappearance?

Since any transgressive act attempting to cross beyond the frame has been eventually incorporated back into it, Bürger saw the historical avant-garde movement as a tragic failure repeated as a farce by the neo-avant-garde; no one, as far as Bürger was concerned, has managed to destroy the art institution, which is to say, the art's autonomy, or yet better, the aesthetic frame. Of course, Bürger's historical interpretation – although assisting greatly in navigating through an unwieldy web – reflects one selective narrative. As American art critic Hal Foster points out, no single theory can encompass all the activities initiated by the avant-garde movements (1996, 11). Thus, unlike Bürger, Foster maintains that more than reconciling or abolishing the separation between art and life, the avant-garde artists were perpetually testing the conventions that defined those frames (ibid, 16). In this light, what Bürger saw as a failure may point toward the frame's endurance. Since without the frame, its conventions cannot be tested, more than obscuring the avant-garde's project, the frame's endurance may, in fact, allow for its continuation.

What is at stake, then, is maybe not a matter of finding the "Ideal distance," as Bullough put it, or of breaking the frame, as Bürger admitted is impossible, more than it is, as Foster implied, a matter of constantly enacting a precarious effort in sustaining the tension between art and life. Maintaining this tension is not the same as finding the compromising middle

ground in resolving the long-lasting problem between 'art as part of life' and 'art as distinct from life.' Instead, it is learning how to stay with the problem, inverting it into a generative source of exploration. One playful strategy I propose to do so is to evoke uncertain distance through the operation I call "unstable framing."

3.3 HOW TO DE-FRAME?

I am now in the position to answer the question I posed at the beginning of the chapter. To recall, the question was how the gap can be brought into focus by considering the frame in which the act of imitation is situated. We saw that frames are often organized so that individuals may easily apply the appropriate interpretation of what is going on using various indicators and cues. We also saw that although frames demand relative stability to fulfill their function, their conventional rules are subject to change. Once the rules that govern a specific frame are violated, before those rules regain their force or before the violation is converted into a convention by accommodating new rules, there is a transitional moment in which the frame, as we have come to know it, is destabilized. Unstable framing is a device that aims to capture this precise transitional moment.

When, for whatever reason, no frame seems to be immediately applicable, or the frame thought to be appropriate no longer seems to be – the individual feels so-to-speak out of frame.

Goffman refers to this inner state as "a negative experience," not because it is unpleasant (although it may as well be) but because this experience is characterized by "what it is not" rather than by "what it is" (1986, 379). Note the difference between Goffman's negative experience and the state of disbelief: While disbelief entails a belief in something else (e.g., "I don't believe it's true, meaning I believe it's false"), a negative experience entails an uncertain belief (e.g., "I don't know if it's true or false"). The opposite of belief is, thus, not disbelief but rather a state of doubt.

The doubt "Is it real?" interrupts the flow of my ongoing experience. When I don't know what to believe or when I become aware of the possibility of being wrong or deceived, I am compelled to slow down, move hesitantly, yet remain vigilant, searching for clues that either confirm or dispute my understanding of what is going on. Likewise, when the frame that separates fiction from reality is destabilized, at some point, to overcome uncertainties, I suspect the spectator will begin to evaluate the reality status of what she perceives. Her "negative experience" induces her to engage in a constant referential process to the real or what she thinks she knows about the real. During this process, the gap between her schema assemblage (whose content is what I previously referred to as "the ghost of the double") and her current perception (in this case, the performer's masked body) is being tested, and the gap becomes the focus of her attention.

Surely, the desired effect of unstable framing cannot be guaranteed, but nor can jokes be guaranteed to make us laugh, nor horror films to trigger our fears, and nor do so many simulacrums to manipulate our embodied mind; and how troublesome that is, and how wonderful it is so.

INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION:

Becoming Si$_{(e)}$mulation

*"Always concerned with better respresenting, She [the actress] demonstrates to what a degree appearing creates being. For that is her art - to stimulate absolutely, to project herself as deeply as possible into lives that are not her own. At the end of her effort her vocation becomes clear: to apply herself wholeheartedly to being nothing or to being several." ***
(Camus, 1953, 59)

It is time that I address the research question : Which strategies destabilize the distinction between fiction and reality in the practice of embodied imitation? When I first began this journey, I thought that the answer to this question would comprise a list that, if I were to compile, might be something like this :
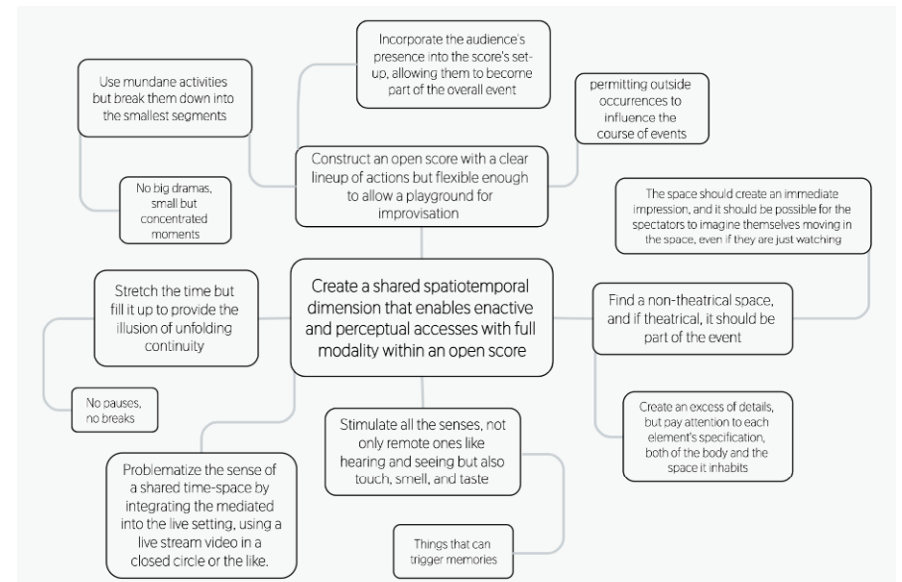

Table 4.1 : A list of strategies aiming to destabilize the distinction between fiction and reality

* Typesetter's note : coloured red to represent the author's invervention with the original quote to modulate gender representation - originally handwritten, but not included as a figure.

However, during the process of writing, when searching for the right keyboard buttons to pin down in words what exactly happened there when I tried to become Mila, or Céline, or Debbi, or Rose, or Kimberly, for that matter, I have realized… In fact, just now, when sitting down to write this conclusion – it has finally hit me: My question was completely wrong!

If I am being honest, the question has not felt quite right from the very beginning, but I was hoping that, somewhere along the way, it would clarify itself. Maybe all my research was about figuring out what the question is really… but now I am not sure there was ever a question, because I am not sure there was even a problem. There was a desire---

It would not be entirely fair of me, nor quite academic, to utterly discard my question; for it still has encouraged me to search, even if secretly I felt that I already knew the answer I was looking for. Because maybe it is not really what I was looking for; maybe it is "what it is not," rather than "what is." The strategies I sketched in the table above are only an overlay; underneath lays bare something without which there would be no silent play. Daring to call the thing by its name, I have attempted to contrive a practice in which the model is not given but felt and the copy is "always already" displaced. It began with a look, a careful look, through which I sought to tweak my habitual perceptions, putting into test the preconceptions I so far had held about the other. When

activated carefully, with an openness to being affected by what I perceived, this look exceeded the mere apprehension of appearance through a cross-modality with other senses, letting the outside flow into my body.

It continued with repetition in a ceaseless endeavor, searching for the shape that would best translate the memory of my sensations from the other's body onto my own, knowing that there will always be a gap between my masked body and the "original presence" I tried to seize and which I, therefore, named "the ghost of the double." Only through my incessant persistence in the face of the ghost's relentless resistance could the gap become salient. The more I tried to reduce the gap, the more it deepened. One has to go against it to let it be felt. Without trying, there is no failure, and the gap loses its force; there would be no more likeness, nor would there be any difference.

It ended with an unstable frame by setting up the conditions that simulate my embodied experience of the other, both for the audience and once again for myself as a performer, inducing the doubt "Is it real?" through a twofold move: One provides the impression of reality while the other disrupts it. One is enacted through aesthetic empathy, the other through the inevitable gap.

This twofold move that at once produces the impression

of reality but not-quite-yet is fragile, like a slight off-bit in a melody, like a familiar scent you don't recall from where, like looking at the mirror and being suddenly startled with a sense of estrangement, a dislocated feeling of unfamiliarity. It is from this dislocated feeling, from this "negative experience" of "what it is not," that the onlooker may gain a new (in)sight into what has, until now, been rendered too familiar, too habitual, to be noticed.

More than once, I stumbled while pursuing this twofold move as if I could ever be sure to achieve it. At times, artificiality dominated; during others, the frame disappeared, and my sense of conviction continually dissolved into uncertainty.

One thing is sure; there is great pleasure in choosing who you want to be, entertaining the thought of being someone else, stepping away for a while from the constraints of your social mask, and deviating from any goal-oriented tasks towards self-advancement. But I think there is a particular pleasure in choosing to be who you do not typically want or permit yourself to be, shedding off your skin and trying on another that is not quite fitting, immersing yourself into a body from which you tend to shy away, for whatever reason – and asking how does it feel to be *that* body?

The commitment to transform my body into another, to simulate, as close as I can, a reality that is not my own, taught

me a great deal both about myself and about the other whom I grew to love. Of course, the desire to understand the other can never be fully fulfilled. My understanding remains partial, speculative, and provisional; but at least now I can imagine more vividly what it could feel like, and the other may not be so other as I thought it to be.

Perhaps there is something right after all in asking the wrong question.

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