

# The Emancipated Spectator

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I have called this talk “The Emancipated Spectator.”\* As I understand it, a title is always a challenge. It sets forth the presupposition that an expression makes sense, that there is a link between separate terms, which also means between concepts, problems, and theories that seem at first sight to bear no direct relation to one another. In a sense, this title expresses the perplexity that was mine when Mårten Spångberg invited me to deliver what is supposed to be the “keynote” lecture of this academy. He told me he wanted me to introduce this collective reflection on “spectatorship” because he had been impressed by my book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [*Le Maître ignorant* (1987)]. I began to wonder what connection there could be between the cause and the effect. This is an academy that brings people involved in the worlds of art, theater, and performance together to consider the issue of spectatorship today. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was a meditation on the eccentric theory and the strange destiny of Joseph Jacotot, a French professor who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, unsettled the academic world by asserting that an ignorant person could teach another ignorant person what he did not know himself, proclaiming the equality of intelligences, and calling for intellectual emancipation against the received wisdom concerning the instruction of the lower classes. His theory sank into oblivion in the middle of the nineteenth century. I thought it necessary to revive it in the 1980s in order to stir up the debate about education and its political stakes. But what use can be made, in the contemporary artistic dialogue, of a man

whose artistic universe could be epitomized by names such as Demosthenes, Racine, and Poussin?

On second thought, it occurred to me that the very distance, the lack of any obvious relationship between Jacotot’s theory and the issue of spectatorship today might be fortunate. It could provide an opportunity to radically distance one’s thoughts from the theoretical and political presuppositions that still shore up, even in postmodern disguise, most of the discussion about theater, performance, and spectatorship. I got the impression that indeed it *was* possible to make sense of this relationship, on condition that we try to piece together the network of presuppositions that put the issue of spectatorship at a strategic intersection in the discussion of the relationship between art and politics and to sketch out the broader pattern of thinking that has for a long time framed the political issues around theater and spectacle (and I use those terms in a very general sense here—to include dance, performance, and all the kinds of spectacle performed by acting bodies in front of a collective audience).

The numerous debates and polemics that have called the theater into question throughout our history can be traced back to a very simple contradiction. Let us call it the paradox of the spectator, a paradox that may prove more crucial than the well-known paradox of the actor and which can be summed up in the simplest terms. There is no theater without spectators (be it only a single and hidden one, as in Diderot’s fictional representation of *Le Fils naturel* [1757]). But spectatorship is a

bad thing. Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing, for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting.

From this diagnosis it is possible to draw two opposing conclusions. The first is that theater in general is a bad thing, that it is the stage of illusion and passivity, which must be dismissed in favor of what it forbids: knowledge and action—the action of knowing and the action led by knowledge. This conclusion was drawn long ago by Plato: The theater is the place where ignorant people are invited to see suffering people. What takes place on the stage is a pathos, the manifestation of a disease, the disease of desire and pain, which is nothing but the self-division of the subject caused by the lack of knowledge. The “action” of theater is nothing but the transmission of that disease through another disease, the disease of the empirical vision that looks at shadows. Theater is the transmission of the ignorance that makes people ill through the medium of ignorance that is optical illusion. Therefore a good community is a community that doesn’t allow the mediation of the theater, a community whose collective virtues are directly incorporated in the living attitudes of its participants.

This seems to be the more logical conclusion to the problem. We know, however, that it is not the conclusion that was most often drawn. The most common conclusion runs as follows: Theater involves spectatorship, and spectatorship is a bad thing. Therefore, we need a new theater, a theater without spectatorship. We need a theater where the optical relation—implied in the word *theatron*—is subjected to another relation, implied in the word *drama*. Drama means action. The theater is a place where an action is actually performed by living bodies in front of living bodies. The latter may have resigned their power. But this power is resumed in the performance of the former, in the intelligence that builds it, in the energy that it conveys. The true sense of the theater must be predicated on that acting power. Theater has to be brought back to its true essence, which is the contrary of what is usually known as theater. What must be pursued is a theater without spectators, a theater where spectators will no longer be spectators, where they will learn things instead of being captured by images

and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers.

This turn has been understood in two ways, which are antagonistic in principle, though they have often been mixed in theatrical performance and in its legitimization. On the one hand the spectator must be released from the passivity of the viewer, who is fascinated by the appearance standing in front of him and identifies with the characters on the stage. He must be confronted with the spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for its strangeness. He must be pressed to abandon the role of passive viewer and to take on that of the scientist who observes phenomena and seeks their cause. On the other hand the spectator must eschew the role of the mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be torn from his delusive mastery, drawn into the magical power of theatrical action, where he will exchange the privilege of playing the rational viewer for the experience of possessing theater’s true vital energies.

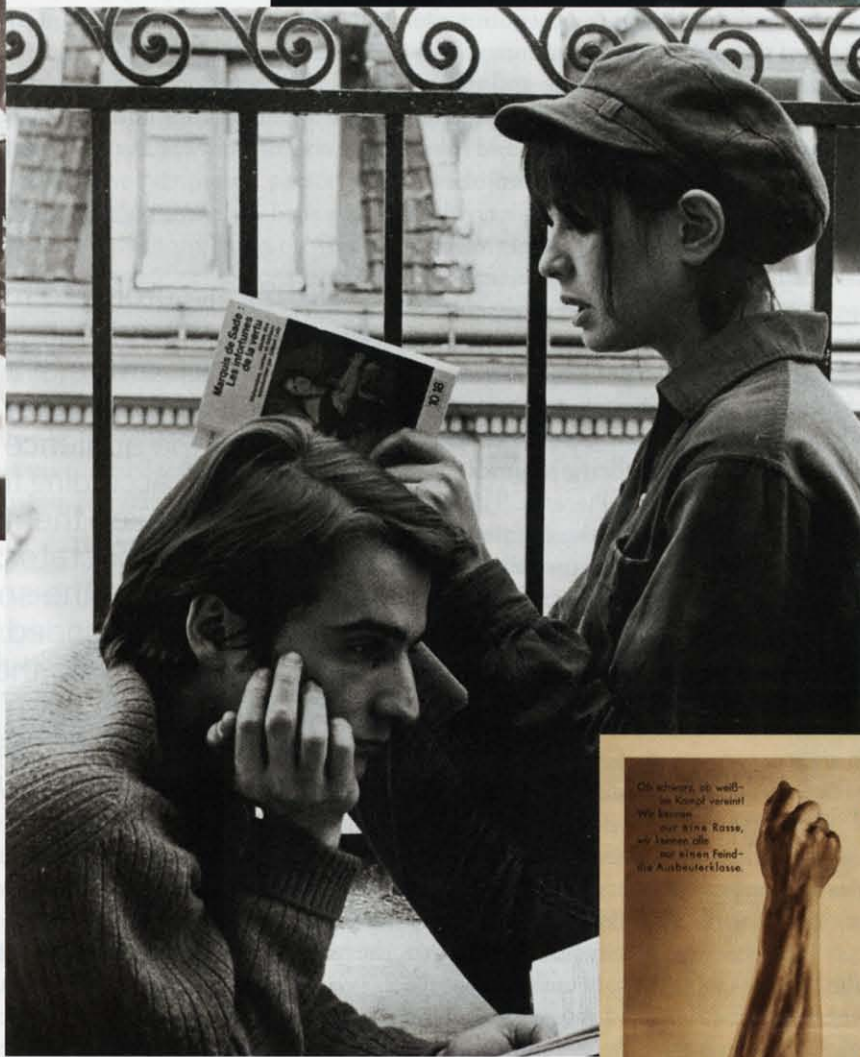
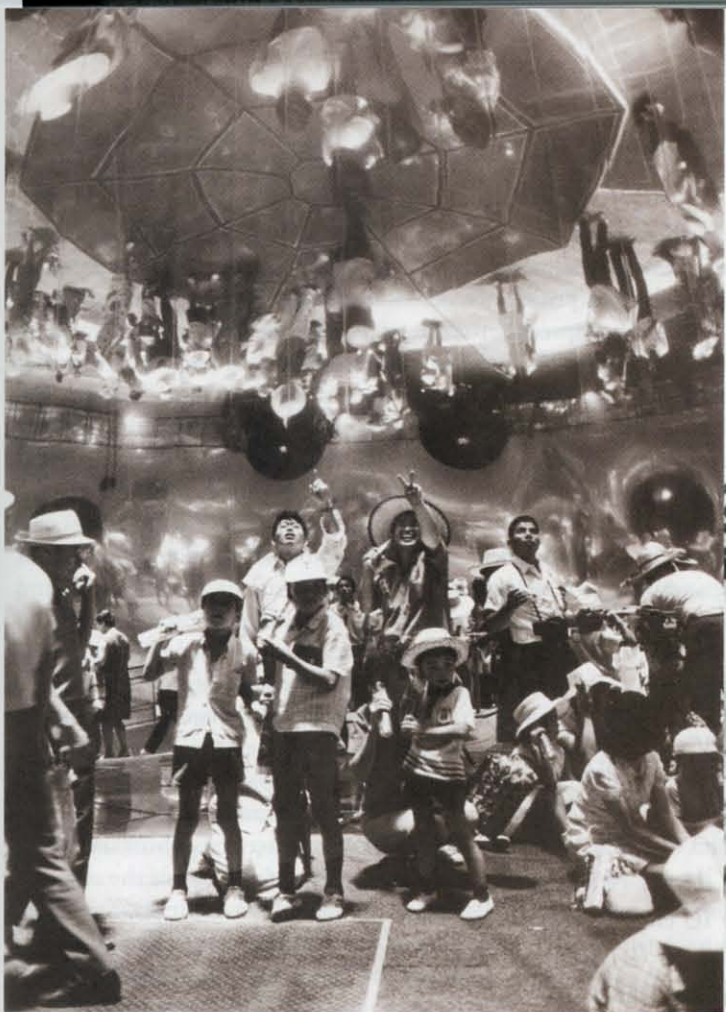
We acknowledge these two paradigmatic attitudes epitomized by Brecht’s epic theater and Artaud’s theater of cruelty. On the one hand the spectator must become more distant, on the other he must lose any distance. On the one hand he must change the way he looks for a better way of looking, on the other he must abandon the very position of the viewer. The project of reforming the theater ceaselessly wavered between these two poles of distant inquiry and vital embodiment. This means that the presuppositions underpinning the search for a new theater are the same as those that underpinned the dismissal of theater. The reformers of the theater in fact retained the terms of Plato’s polemics, rearranging them by borrowing

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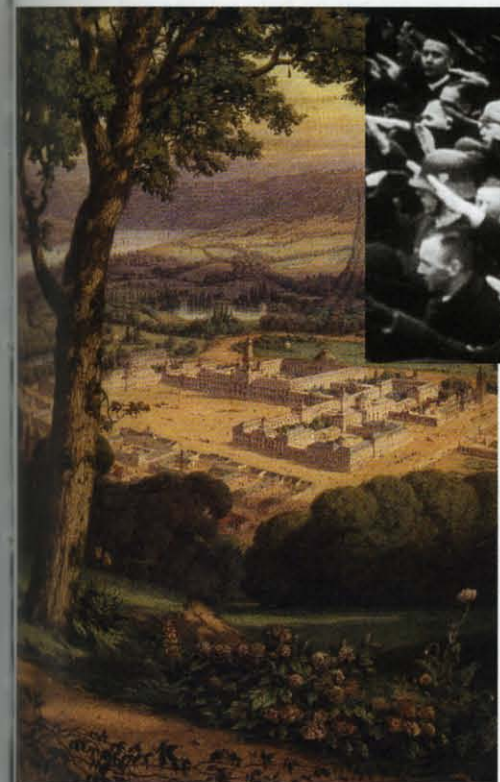
**Since** the advent of German Romanticism, the concept of theater has been associated with the idea of the living community. Theater appeared as a form of the aesthetic constitution of the community: the community as a way of occupying time and space, as a set of living gestures and attitudes, that stands before any kind of political form and institution; community as a performing body instead of an apparatus of forms and rules.

from Platonism an alternative notion of theater. Plato drew an opposition between the poetic and democratic community of the theater and a “true” community: a choreographic community in which no one remains a motionless spectator, in which everyone moves according to a communitarian rhythm determined by mathematical proportion.

The reformers of the theater restaged the Platonic opposition between *choreia* and *theater* as an opposition between the true living essence of the theater and the simulacrum of the “spectacle.” The theater then became the place where passive spectatorship had to be turned into its contrary—the living body of a community enacting its own principle. In this academy’s statement of purpose we read that “theater remains the only place of direct confrontation of the audience with itself as a collective.” We can give that sentence a restrictive meaning that would merely



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contrast the collective audience of the theater with the individual visitors to an exhibition or the sheer collection of individuals watching a movie. But obviously the sentence means much more. It means that "theater" remains the name for an idea of the community as a living body. It conveys an idea of the community as self-presence opposed to the distance of the representation.

Since the advent of German Romanticism, the concept of theater has been associated with the idea of the living community. Theater appeared as a form of the aesthetic constitution—meaning the sensory constitution—of the community: the community as a way of occupying time and space, as a set of living gestures and attitudes that stands before any kind of political form and institution; community as a performing body instead of an apparatus of forms and rules. In this way theater was associated with the Romantic notion of the aesthetic revolution: the idea of a revolution that would change not only laws and institutions but transform the sensory forms of human experience. The reform of theater thus meant the restoration of its authenticity as an assembly or a ceremony of the community. Theater is an assembly where the people become aware of their situation and discuss their own interests, Brecht would say after Piscator. Theater is the ceremony where the community is given possession of its own energies, Artaud would state. If theater is held to be an equivalent of the true community, the living body of the community opposed to the illusion of mimesis, it comes as no surprise that the attempt at restoring theater to its true essence had as its theoretical backdrop the critique of the spectacle.

What is the essence of spectacle in Guy Debord's theory? It is externality. The spectacle is the reign of vision. Vision means externality. Now externality means the dispossession of one's own being. "The more man contemplates, the less he is," Debord says. This may sound anti-Platonic. Indeed, the main source for the critique of the spectacle is, of course, Feuerbach's critique of religion. It is what sustains that critique—namely, the Romantic idea of truth as unseparateness. But that idea itself remains in line with the Platonic disengagement of the mimetic image. The contemplation that Debord denounces is the theatrical or mimetic contemplation, the contemplation of the suffering that is provoked by division. "Separation is the alpha and the omega of spectacle," he writes. What man gazes at in this scheme is the activity that has been stolen from him; it is his own essence torn away from him, turned foreign to him, hostile to him, making for a collective world whose reality is nothing but man's own dispossession.

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**Either**, according to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes the audience aware of the social situation on which theater itself rests, prompting the audience to act in consequence. Or, according to the Artaudian scheme, it makes them abandon the position of spectator: No longer seated in front of the spectacle, they are instead surrounded by the performance, dragged into the circle of the action, which gives them back their collective energy. In both cases the theater is a self-suppressing mediation.

From this perspective there is no contradiction between the quest for a theater that can realize its true essence and the critique of the spectacle. "Good" theater is posited as a theater that deploys its separate reality only in order to suppress it, to turn the theatrical form into a form of life of the community. The paradox of the spectator is part of an intellectual disposition that is, even in the name of the theater, in keeping with the Platonic dismissal of the theater. This framework is built around a number of core ideas that must be called into question. Indeed, we must question the very footing on which those ideas are based. I am speaking of a whole set of relations, resting on some key equivalences and some key oppositions: the equivalence of theater and community, of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, of mediation and simulacrum; the opposition of collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation.

This set of equivalences and oppositions makes for a rather tricky dramaturgy of guilt and redemption. Theater is charged with making spectators passive in opposition to its very essence, which allegedly consists in the self-activity of the community. As a consequence, it sets itself the task of reversing its own effect and compensating for its own guilt by giving back to the spectators their self-consciousness or self-activity. The theatrical stage and the theatrical performance thus become the vanishing mediation between the evil of the spectacle and the virtue of the true theater. They present to the collective audience performances intended to teach the spectators how they can stop being spectators and become performers of a collective activity. Either, according to the

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This is the point where the descriptions and propositions of intellectual emancipation enter into the picture and help us reframe it. Obviously, this idea of a self-suppressing mediation is well known to us. It is precisely the process that is supposed to take place in the pedagogical relation. In the pedagogical process the role of the schoolmaster is posited as the act of suppressing the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant. His lessons and exercises are aimed at

continuously reducing the gap between knowledge and ignorance. Unfortunately, in order to reduce the gap, he must reinstate it ceaselessly. In order to replace ignorance with adequate knowledge, he must always keep a step ahead of the ignorant student who is losing his ignorance. The reason for this is simple: In the pedagogical scheme, the ignorant person is not only the one who does not know what he does not know; he is as well the one who ignores that he does not know what he does not know and ignores how to know it. The master is not only he who knows precisely what remains unknown to the ignorant; he also knows how to make it knowable, at what time and what place, according to what protocol. On the one hand pedagogy is set up as a process of objective transmission: one piece of knowledge after another piece, one word after another word, one rule or theorem after another. This knowledge is supposed to be conveyed directly from the master's mind or from the page of the book to the mind of the pupil. But this equal transmission is predicated on a relation of inequality. The master alone knows the right way, time, and place for that "equal" transmission, because he knows something that the ignorant will never know, short of becoming a master himself, something that is more important than the knowledge conveyed. He knows the exact distance between ignorance and knowledge. That pedagogical distance between a determined ignorance and a determined knowledge is in fact a metaphor. It is the metaphor of a radical break between the way of the ignorant student and the way of the master, the metaphor of a radical break between two intelligences.

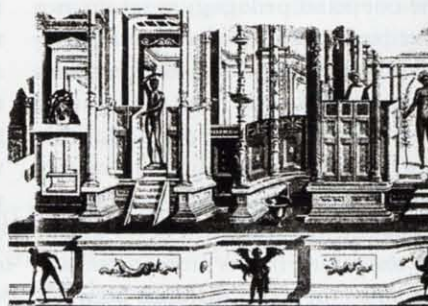
The master cannot ignore that the so-called ignorant pupil who sits in front of him in fact knows a lot of things, which he has learned on his own, by looking at and listening to the world around him, by figuring out the meaning of what he has seen and heard, by repeating what he has heard and learned by chance, by comparing what he discovers with what he already knows, and so on. The master cannot ignore that the ignorant pupil has undertaken by these same means the apprenticeship that is the precondition of all others: the apprenticeship of his mother tongue. But for the master this is only the knowledge of the ignorant, the knowledge of the little child who sees and hears at random, compares and guesses by chance, and repeats by routine, without understanding the reason for the effects he observes and reproduces. The role of the master is thus to break with that process of hit-and-miss groping. It is to teach the pupil the knowledge of the knowledgeable, in its own way—the way of the progressive method, which dismisses all groping and all chance by explaining items in order, from the simplest to the most complex, according to what the pupil is capable of understanding, with respect to his age or social background and social expectations.

The primary knowledge that the master owns is the "knowledge of ignorance." It is the presupposition of a radical break between two forms of intelligence. This is also the primary knowledge that he transmits to the student: the knowledge that he must have things explained to him in order to understand, the knowledge that he cannot understand on his

own. It is the knowledge of his incapacity. In this way, progressive instruction is the endless verification of its starting point: inequality. That endless verification of inequality is what Jacotot calls the process of stultification. The opposite of stultification is emancipation. Emancipation is the process of verification of the equality of intelligence. The equality of intelligence is not the equality of all manifestations of intelligence. It is the equality of intelligence in all its manifestations. It means that there is no gap between two forms of intelligence. The human animal learns everything as he has learned his mother tongue, as he has learned to venture through the forest of things and signs that surrounds him, in order to take his place among his fellow humans—by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact, one sign with another sign, and repeating the experiences he has first encountered by chance. If the "ignorant" person who doesn't know how to read knows only one thing by heart, be it a simple prayer, he can compare that knowledge with something of which he remains ignorant: the words of the same prayer written on paper. He can learn, sign after sign, the resemblance of that of which he is ignorant to that which he knows. He can do it if, at each step, he observes what is in front of him, tells what he has seen, and verifies what he has told. From the ignorant person to the scientist who builds hypotheses, it is always the same intelligence that is at work: an intelligence that makes figures and comparisons to communicate its intellectual adventures and to understand what another intelligence is trying to communicate to it in turn.

This poetic work of translation is the first condition of any apprenticeship. Intellectual emancipation, as Jacotot conceived of it, means the awareness and the enactment of that equal power of translation and counter-translation. Emancipation entails an idea of distance opposed to the stultifying one. Speaking animals are distant animals who try to communicate through the forest of signs. It is this sense of distance that the "ignorant master"—the master who ignores inequality—is teaching. Distance is not an evil that should be abolished. It is the normal condition of communication. It is not a gap that calls for an expert in the art of suppressing it. The distance that the "ignorant" person has to cover is not the gap between his ignorance and the knowledge of his master; it is the distance between what he already knows and what he still doesn't know but can learn by the same process. To help his pupil cover that distance, the "ignorant master" need not be ignorant. He need only dissociate his knowledge from his mastery. He does not teach *his* knowledge to the students. He commands them to venture forth in the forest, to report what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to verify it, and so on. What he ignores is the gap between two intelligences. It is the linkage between the knowledge of the knowledgeable and the ignorance of the ignorant. Any distance is a matter of happenstance. Each intellectual act weaves a casual thread between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge. No kind of social hierarchy can be predicated on this sense of distance.

What is the relevance of this story with respect to the question of the spectator? Dramaturges today aren't out to explain to their audience the



truth about social relations and the best means to do away with domination. But it isn't enough to lose one's illusions. On the contrary, the loss of illusions often leads the dramaturge or the performers to increase the pressure on the spectator: Maybe *he* will know what has to be done, if the performance changes him, if it sets him apart from his passive attitude and makes him an active participant in the communal world. This is the first point that the reformers of the theater share with the stultifying pedagogues: the idea of the gap between two positions. Even when the dramaturge or the performer doesn't know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that the spectator has to do something: switch from passivity to activity.

But why not turn things around? Why not think, in this case too, that it is precisely the attempt at suppressing the distance that constitutes the distance itself? Why identify the fact of being seated motionless with inactivity, if not by the presupposition of a radical gap between activity and inactivity? Why identify "looking" with "passivity" if not by the presupposition that looking means looking at the image or the appearance, that it means being separated from the reality that is always behind the image? Why identify hearing with being passive, if not by the presupposition that acting is the opposite of speaking, etc.? All these oppositions—looking/knowing, looking/acting, appearance/reality, activity/passivity—are much more than logical oppositions. They are what I call a partition of the sensible, a distribution of places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places. Put in other terms, they are allegories of inequality. This is why you can change the values given to each position without changing the meaning of the oppositions themselves. For instance, you can exchange the positions of the superior and the inferior. The spectator is usually disparaged because he does nothing, while the performers on the stage—or the workers outside—do something with their bodies. But it is easy to turn matters around by stating that those who act, those who work with their bodies, are obviously inferior to those who are able to look—that is, those who can contemplate ideas, foresee the future, or take a global view of our world. The positions can be switched, but the structure remains the same. What counts, in fact, is only the statement of opposition between two categories: There is one population that *cannot* do what the other population does. There is *capacity* on one side and *incapacity* on the other.

Emancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of

the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. She participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story that is in front of her. Or if she is able to undo the performance—for instance, to deny the corporeal energy that it is supposed to convey the here and now and transform it into a mere image, by linking it with something she has read in a book or dreamed about, that she has lived or imagined. These are distant viewers and interpreters of what is performed in front of them. They pay attention to the performance to the extent that they are distant.

This is the second key point: The spectators see, feel, and understand something to the extent that they make their poems as the poet has done, as the actors, dancers, or performers have done. The dramaturge would like them to see *this* thing, feel *that* feeling, understand *this* lesson of what they see, and get into *that* action in consequence of what they have seen, felt, and understood. He proceeds from the same presupposition as the stultifying master: the presupposition of an equal, undistorted transmission. The master presupposes that what the student learns is precisely what he teaches him. This is the master's notion of transmission: There is something on one side, in one mind or one body—a knowledge, a capacity, an energy—that must be transferred to the other side, into the other's mind or body. The presup-

position is that the process of learning is not merely the effect of its cause—teaching—but the very transmission of the cause: What the student learns is the knowledge of the master. That identity of cause and effect is the principle of stultification. On the contrary, the principle of emancipation is the dissociation of cause and effect. The paradox of the ignorant master lies therein. The student of the ignorant master learns what his master does not know, since his master commands him to look for something and to recount everything he discovers along the way while the master verifies that he is actually looking for it. The student learns something as an effect of his master's mastery. But he does not learn his master's knowledge.

The dramaturge and the performer do not want to "teach" anything. Indeed, they are more than a little wary these days about using the stage as a way of teaching. They want only to bring about a form of awareness

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or a force of feeling or action. But still they make the supposition that what will be felt or understood will be what they have put in their own script or performance. They presuppose the equality—meaning the homogeneity—of cause and effect. As we know, this equality rests on an inequality. It rests on the presupposition that there is a proper knowledge and proper practice with respect to “distance” and the means of suppressing it. Now this distance takes on two forms. There is the distance between performer and spectator. But there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, inasmuch as it is a mediating “spectacle” that stands between the artist’s idea and the spectator’s feeling and interpretation. This spectacle is a third term, to which the other two can refer, but which prevents any kind of “equal” or “undistorted” transmission. It is a mediation between them, and that mediation of a third term is crucial in the process of intellectual emancipation. To prevent stultification there must be something *between* the master and the student. The same thing that links them must also separate them. Jacotot posited the book as that in-between thing. The book is the material thing, foreign to both master and student, through which they can verify what the student has seen, what he has reported about it, what he thinks of what he has reported.

This means that the paradigm of intellectual emancipation is clearly opposed to another idea of emancipation on which the reform of theater has often been grounded—the idea of emancipation as the reappropriation of a self that had been lost in a process of separation. The Debordian critique of the spectacle still rests on the Feuerbachian thinking of representation as an alienation of the self: The human being tears its human essence away from itself by framing a celestial world to which the real human world is submitted. In the same way, the essence of human activity is distanced, alienated from us in the exteriority of the spectacle. The mediation of the “third term” thus appears as the instance of separation, dispossession, and treachery. An idea of the theater predicated on that idea of the spectacle conceives the externality of the stage as a kind of transitory state that has to be superseded. The suppression of that exteriority thus becomes the telos of the performance. That program demands that the spectators be on the stage and the performers in the auditorium. It demands that the very difference between the two spaces be abolished, that the performance take place anywhere other than in a theater. Certainly many improvements in theatrical performance resulted from that breaking down of the traditional distribution of places (in the sense of both sites and roles). But the “redistribution” of places is one thing; the demand that the theater achieve, as its essence, the gathering of an unseparate community is another thing. The first entails the invention of new forms of intellectual adventure; the second entails a new

form of Platonic assignment of bodies to their proper—that is, to their “communal”—place.

This presupposition against mediation is connected with a third one, the presupposition that the essence of theater is the essence of the community. The spectator is supposed to be redeemed when he is no longer an individual, when he is restored to the status of a member of a community, when he is carried off in a flood of the collective energy or led to the position of the citizen who acts as a member of the collective. The less the dramaturge knows what the spectators should do as a collective, the more he knows that they *must* become a collective, turn their mere agglomeration into the community that they virtually are. It is high time, I think, to call into question the idea of the theater as a specifically communitarian place. It is supposed to be such a place because, on the stage, real living bodies perform for people who are physically present together in the same place. In that way it is supposed to provide some unique sense of community, radically different from the situation of the individual watching television, or of moviegoers who

sit in front of disembodied, projected images. Strange as it may seem, the widespread use of images and of all kinds of media in theatrical performances hasn’t called the presupposition into question. Images may take the place of living bodies in the performance, but as long as the spectators are gathered there the living and communitarian essence of the theater appears to be saved. Thus it seems impossible to escape the question, What specifically happens among the spectators in a theater that doesn’t happen elsewhere? Is there something more interactive, more communal, that goes on between them than between individuals who watch the same show on TV at the same time?

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**The common power of spectators is the power of the equality of intelligences. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that it keeps them apart from each other; it is the power each of us possesses in equal measure to make our own way in the world.**

I think that this “something” is nothing more than the presupposition that the theater is communitarian in and of itself. That presupposition of what “theater” means always runs ahead of the performance and pre-dates its actual effects. But in a theater, or in front of a performance, just as in a museum, at a school, or on the street, there are only individuals, weaving their own way through the forest of words, acts, and things that stand in front of them or around them. The collective power that is common to these spectators is not the status of members of a collective body. Nor is it a peculiar kind of interactivity. It is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at. It is the power to connect it with the intellectual adventure that makes any of them similar to any other insofar as his or her path looks unlike any other. The common power is the power of the equality of intelligences. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that it keeps them apart from each other; it is the power each of us possesses in equal measure to make our own way in the world. What has to be put to the test by our performances—whether

teaching or acting, speaking, writing, making art, etc.—is not the capacity of aggregation of a collective but the capacity of the anonymous, the capacity that makes anybody equal to everybody. This capacity works through unpredictable and irreducible distances. It works through an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and dissociations.

Associating and dissociating instead of being the privileged medium that conveys the knowledge or energy that makes people active—this could be the principle of an “emancipation of the spectator,” which means the emancipation of any of us as a spectator. Spectatorship is not a passivity that must be turned into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know, as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamed. There is no privileged medium, just as there is no privileged starting point. Everywhere there are starting points and turning points from which we learn new things, if we first dismiss the presupposition of distance, second the distribution of the roles, and third the borders between territories. We don’t need to turn spectators into actors. We do need to acknowledge that every spectator is already an actor in his own story and that every actor is in turn the spectator of the same kind of story. We needn’t turn the ignorant into the learned or, merely out of a desire to overturn things, make the student or the ignorant person the master of his masters.

Let me make a little detour through my own political and academic experience. I belong to a generation that was poised between two competing perspectives: According to the first, those who possessed the intelligence of the social system had to pass their learning on to those who suffered under that system, so that they would then take action to overthrow it. According to the second, the supposed learned persons were in fact ignorant: Because they knew nothing of what exploitation and rebellion were, they had to become the students of the so-called ignorant workers. Therefore, initially I tried to reelaborate Marxist theory in order to make its theoretical weapons available to a new revolutionary movement, before setting out to learn from those who worked in the factories what exploitation and rebellion meant. For me, as for many other people of my generation, none of those attempts proved very successful. That’s why I decided to look into the history of the workers’ movement, to find out the reasons for the continual mismatching of workers and the intellectuals who came and visited them, either to instruct them or to be instructed by them. It was my good fortune to discover that this relationship wasn’t a matter of knowledge on one side and ignorance on the other, nor was it a matter of knowing versus acting or of individuality versus community. One day in May, during the 1970s, as I was looking through a worker’s correspondence from the 1830s to determine what the condition and consciousness of workers had been at that time, I discovered something quite different: the adventures of two visitors, also on a day in May, but some hundred and forty years before I stumbled upon their letters in the archives. One of the two

correspondents had just been introduced into the utopian community of the Saint-Simonians, and he recounted to his friend his daily schedule in utopia: work, exercises, games, singing, and stories. His friend in turn wrote to him about a country outing that he had just gone on with two other workers looking to enjoy their Sunday leisure. But it wasn’t the usual Sunday leisure of the worker seeking to restore his physical and mental forces for the following week of work. It was in fact a breakthrough into another kind of leisure—that of aesthetes who enjoy the forms, lights, and shades of nature, of philosophers who spend their time exchanging metaphysical hypotheses in a country inn, and of apostles who set out to communicate their faith to the chance companions they meet along the road.

Those workers who should have provided me information about the conditions of labor and forms of class-consciousness in the 1830s instead provided something quite different: a sense of likeness or equality. They too were spectators and visitors, amid their own class. Their activity as propagandists could not be torn from their “passivity” as mere strollers and contemplators. The chronicle of their leisure entailed a reframing of the very relationship between *doing*, *seeing*, and *saying*. By becoming “spectators,” they overthrew the given distribution of the sensible, which had it that those who work have no time left to stroll and look at random, that the members of a collective body have no time to be “individuals.” This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between those who look and those who act, between those who are individuals and those who are members of a collective body. What those days brought our chroniclers was not knowledge and energy for future action. It was the reconfiguration *hic et nunc* of the distribution of Time and Space. Workers’ emancipation was not about acquiring the knowledge of their condition. It was about configuring a time and a space that invalidated the old distribution of the sensible, which doomed workers to do nothing with their nights but restore their forces for work the next day.

Understanding the sense of that break in the heart of time also meant putting into play another kind of knowledge, predicated not on the presupposition of any gap but on the presupposition of likeness. These men, too, were intellectuals—as anybody is. They were visitors and spectators, just like the researcher who, one hundred and forty years later, would read their letters in a library, just like visitors to Marxist theory or at the gates of a factory. There was no gap to bridge between intellectuals and workers, actors and spectators; no gap between two populations, two situations, or two ages. On the contrary, there was a likeness that had to be acknowledged and put into play in the very production of knowledge. Putting it into play meant two things. First, it meant rejecting the borders between disciplines. Telling the (hi)story of those workers’ days and nights forced me to blur the boundary between the field of “empirical” history and the field of “pure” philosophy. The story that those workers told was about time, about the loss and reappropriation of time. To show what it meant, I had to put their account in direct

relation with the theoretical discourse of the philosopher who had, long ago in the *Republic*, told the same story by explaining that in a well-ordered community everybody must do only one thing, his or her own business, and that workers in any case had no time to spend anywhere other than their workplace or to do anything but the job fitting the (in)capacity with which nature had endowed them. Philosophy, then, could no longer present itself as a sphere of pure thought separated from the sphere of empirical facts. Nor was it the theoretical interpretation of those facts. There were neither facts nor interpretations. There were two ways of telling stories.

Blurring the border between academic disciplines also meant blurring the hierarchy between the levels of discourse, between the narration of a story and the philosophical or scientific explanation of it or the truth lying behind or beneath it. There was no metadiscourse explicating the truth of a lower level of discourse. What had to be done was a work of translation, showing how empirical stories and philosophical discourses translate each other. Producing a new knowledge meant inventing the idiomatic form that would make translation possible. I had to use that idiom to tell of my own intellectual adventure, at the risk that the idiom would remain “unreadable” for those who wanted to know the cause of the story, its true meaning, or the lesson for action that could be drawn from it. I had to produce a discourse that would be readable only for those who would make their own translation from the point of view of their own adventure.

That personal detour may lead us back to the core of our problem. These issues of crossing borders and blurring the distribution of roles are defining characteristics of theater and of contemporary art today, when all artistic competences stray from their own field and exchange places and powers with all others. We have plays without words and dance with words; installations and performances instead of “plastic” works; video projections turned into cycles of frescoes; photographs turned into living pictures or history paintings; sculpture that becomes hypermediatic show; etc. Now, there are three ways of understanding and practicing this confusion of the genres. There is the revival of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is supposed to be the apotheosis of art as a form of life but which proves instead to be the apotheosis of strong artistic egos or of a kind of hyperactive consumerism, if not of both at the same time. There is the idea of a “hybridization” of the means of art, which complements the view of our age as one of mass individualism expressed through the relentless exchange between roles and identities, reality and virtuality, life and mechanical prostheses, and so on. In my view, this second interpretation ultimately leads to the same place as the first one—to another kind of hyperactive consumerism, another kind of stultification,

inasmuch as it effects the crossing of borders and the confusion of roles merely as a means of increasing the power of the performance without questioning its grounds.

The third way—the best way in my view—does not aim at the amplification of the effect but at the transformation of the cause/effect scheme itself, at the dismissal of the set of oppositions that grounds the process of stultification. It invalidates the opposition between activity and passivity as well as the scheme of “equal transmission” and the communitarian idea of the theater that in fact makes it an allegory of inequality. The crossing of borders and the confusion of roles shouldn’t lead to a kind of “hypertheater,” turning spectatorship into activity by turning representation into presence. On the contrary, theater should question its privileging of living presence and bring the stage back to a level of equality with the telling of a story or the writing and the reading of a book. It should be the institution of a new stage of equality, where the different kinds of perfor-

mances would be translated into one another. In all those performances, in fact, it should be a matter of linking what one knows with what one does not know, of being at the same time performers who display their competences and spectators who are looking to find what those competences might produce in a new context, among unknown people. Artists, like researchers, build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.

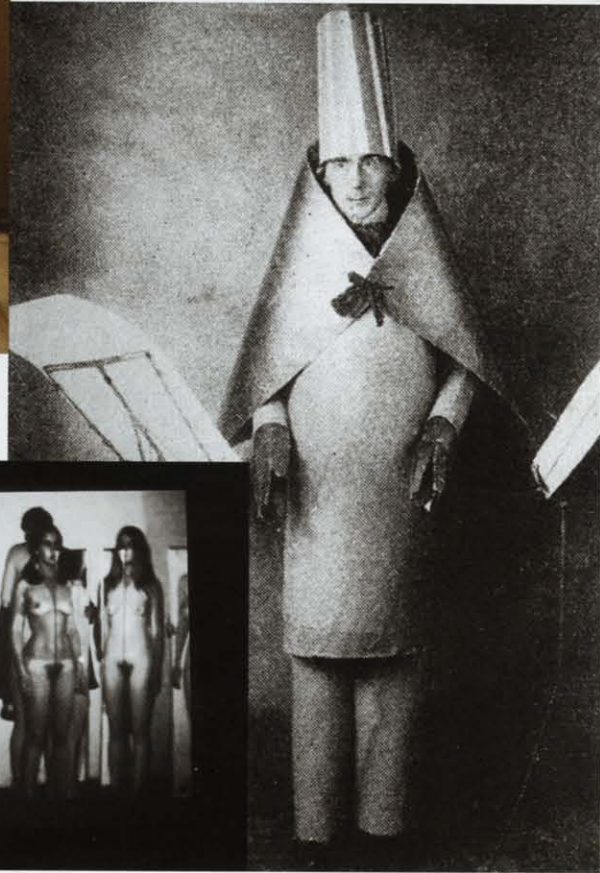
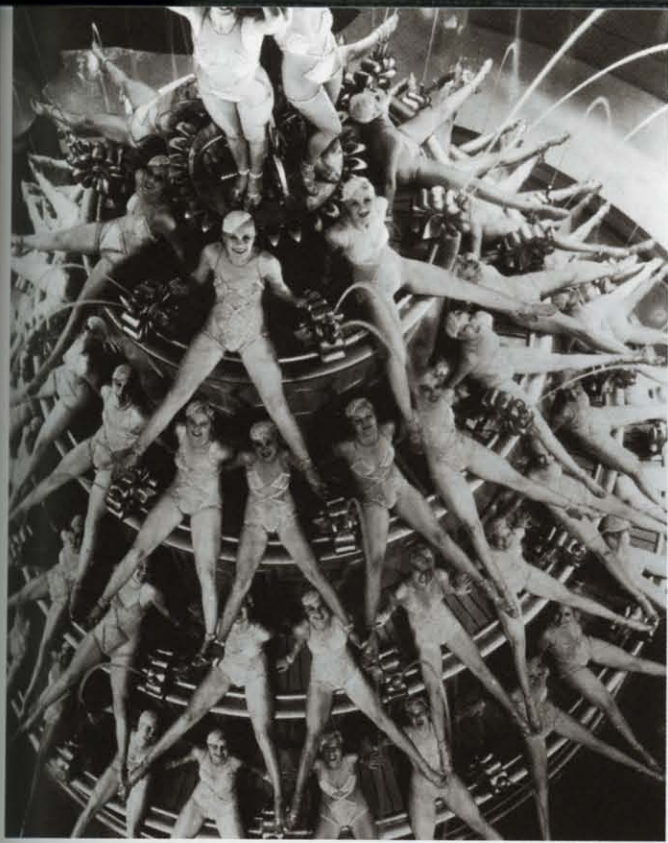
I’m aware that all this may sound like words, mere words. But I wouldn’t take that as an insult. We’ve heard so many speakers pass their words off as more than words, as passwords enabling us to enter a new life. We’ve seen so many spectacles boasting of being no mere spectacles but ceremonials of community. Even now, in spite of the so-called postmodern skepticism about changing the way we live, one sees so many shows posing as religious mysteries that it might not seem so outrageous to hear, for a change, that words are only words. Breaking away from the phantasms of the Word made flesh and the spectator turned active, knowing that words are only words and spectacles only spectacles, may help us better understand how words, stories, and performances can help us change something in the world we live in. □

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