ARTICLE

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> I cannot remember how I finished the scene, because the footlights and the black hole disappeared from my consciousness, and I was free of all fear. I remember that Paul was at first astonished by the change in me; then he became infected by it, and acted with abandon.

Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*[1]

What are the different interconnected spaces and times in the construction of the character in drama, and to what extent is acting 'live' performances consubstantial with the notion of the multifarious, and especially the multiverse?

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, multiverse is defined as "a collection of different universes that are thought by some people to exist at the same time."[2] A universe is "everything that exists," that is, a whole space. It thus represents in a human being layers of sediments composed of feelings, memories, impressions, sensations, words, events – in short, affect and images – which day after day, year after year, expand, forming an increasingly complex network. The term can also refer to what we are familiar with, or "the people and companies involved in a particular activity."[3] Additionally, the notion of metaverse has recently emerged with the new technologies. A metaverse is understood as "a virtual-reality space in which users can interact with a computer-generated environment and other users."[4] Such different realities pose the question of how they intertwine or overlap in the arts, especially those involving teamwork and live performances. The multiverse is at play when art mobilises individuals working together towards the same goal: the performance of the play in a specific place, at a specific time and for a certain duration. Audiences willingly participate in the theatrical ceremony, which consists of a collection of different mindscapes that enter a "virtual-yet-embodied" reality – that of the theatrical illusion.

Based on eighteenth-century theoretical debates on the actor's art, reignited in the twentieth century by Constantin Stanislavski, this article reflects on performance as a multiverse system integrating different spaces, times and non-times. It examines the inner and outer aspects of performing, and how the stage can be seen as a junction between virtual realities and physical presence. It considers acting, not only as the art of the present moment, but also as a "transverse

effect" where the actors navigate diverse and even diffracted universes that interweave in the performance. The study of this multiverse system can help us better understand cognitive functions and states of consciousness, as well as new philosophical views of the self, the phenomenology of acting and the philosophy of mind.

Acting has been extensively discussed in France from the early modern period onwards, especially the different steps involved from playwriting (classical rules and Aristotelian *mimèsis*) to acting (*actio oratoria*).[5] Debates on performing interrogated the translation, or rather transposition, on stage, of the dramatic poet's mental universe. The *spirit* of the roles symbolised such intangible and somehow ineffable mindscapes. In the seventeenth century, primacy was given to the author – hence a text-centric approach to performance – over the actor, who had to reproduce the lines with his body alone and project the image of the character. Actors were to visually reconstruct the author's words and then transmit these to the audience; they were seen as a junction point of a chain of emotions – a *transmitter* bridging different inner spaces.[6] Until the 1740s, the actor was not seen as a person with subjectivity and sensitivity who could create his own character from the play, or as the centre of a multiversal system of which the self could be the linchpin. Indeed, in 1758, Louis Charpentier claimed that "The actor is only an instrument which the poet uses to communicate his ideas to us, in much the same way as a violin is used to charm the ears with the most touching sounds."[7] He denied the actor the status of artist, arguing that "the different expressions he attributes to the Actor [the character] are not his. At any given moment in the Theatre, he is only the copyist of his original. All his action comes out of the background of the play, it is the Author who lends it to him."[8] As a matrix, the actor's lines were to be embodied mechanically through multiple rules devised to represent the passions,[9] so that the genesis of the acting phenomenon, its collaborative and synergistic nature, and the inner workings of the creative process of teamwork, were disregarded.

These views were challenged in the mid-eighteenth century: the construction of a universe *through* another one became a salient point for discussion. The actor's own inner space was increasingly scrutinised, especially its multidimensional and intersectional aspects;[10] these included his imagination, intelligence, inventiveness, knowledge of the world (such as manners and social skills) and past lived experiences (such as affective memory).

Absorbing and transfiguring the role in the actor's mind and psyche marked a shift in theories on acting, now more centred on virtual realities in progress. In his essay "Observations sur une brochure intitulée *Garrick ou Les Acteurs anglais*," published in 1769, Denis Diderot referred to a universal way of performing a role: great actors first develop a specific space and mental state – even before rehearsing with their acting partners – absorbing the text, but at the same time creating an inner visualisation of the character, similar to a virtual game. Diderot praised in particular the technique of Mlle Clairon: "nonchalantly lying in her *chaise longue*, with her eyes closed, she can, by silently following her role from memory, hear herself, see herself on the stage, assess herself and the impressions she will excite."[11] This example illustrates the growing interest in a kind of meta-universe created in the actor's mind, understood as an unlimited space outside physicality, interconnecting the character, person, personality and persona.

The preliminary phases of acting could be compared to a mental incubator, where the character evolves, grows and transforms itself. The process of inner creation involves the intellectual faculties and in particular the power of imagination. In the example given by Diderot, Mlle Clairon

simultaneously has several roles: that of a director, in that she directs the movements of the character, putting it in context in a space that is intended to be identical to the set; that of a spectator and judge of her own character–simulacrum as she gradually invents and retouches it at will; that of an actor, in that it is indeed a clone or mental double that retains the role played. This process is amplified and multiplied with actors performing the same play every day; and duplicated when it comes to rehearsing the same roles or performing them at different times, creating an invisible chain of interactive image-creations.

This mode of creating in a multiplied and multitudinous way could be linked to Hélène Cixous' work on playwriting, especially her concept of the authorial self and its other fictional selves. Writing for the theatre involves "intersubjective relationships in which the authorial self is displaced" and "multiplied through the characters of the play," a process which can involve a sense of diffraction, and even a loss of gender specificity. In this way, the "self becomes the site of the other[s]."[12] Preparing a role means experiencing alterity; this activity has an impact on the psyche through painful processes of estrangement: "To write for the theatre, one has to go far from oneself, to set out, travelling for a long time in darkness until one no longer knows where or who one is; it's very difficult."[13] In this process, the mind is comparable to an interactive platform for playing and acting out the self through written language or, in the case of Mlle Clairon, for acting out the role through visual language. This can be, according to Cixous, a form of *démoïsation* or "unselving,"[14] which she refers to as a "long and fabulous suspension of the I which is no longer I and not yet you."[15]

According to Diderot, the actor's mind was key, constructing a hall of mirrors where the character could be infinitely varied and tweaked. The theatre of consciousness, as Daniel Dennett would later put it,[16] streamed variants of the character out-of-time, and perhaps in an ungendered abstract form. Diderot's "imaginary model" represents a *mise en abyme* of a self simultaneously and virtually on stage and off stage. Before rehearsing and blocking the scenes, actors were recommended to construct this model by activating different times and non-times – that is, the present moment (the time of creation), past memories and affects, and atemporal images and sounds (the inner 'movie screen'). In this way, the internalisation of the role was theorised as a two-step process characterised by the spatialisation of the scenes (virtual space), followed by the visual embodiment of the role (scripting and staging of the scenes). However, this inner multiverse was not necessarily visible during the performance, as various contingencies inevitably prevented actors from perfectly embodying their mental Character. They also had to be in tune with their partners' inner creations. Poor *ensemble* (disharmonious or desynchronised acting) often was blamed for a flawed performance, suggesting a lack of congruence between the players' mindscapes.[17]

Impulse acting became fashionable, opening doors to more improvisation on stage and instinctive ways of performing;[18] this required a perfect conjunction of minds and bodies to form a whole (the performance). The study of the 'human' element in performance led theorists such as Rémond de Sainte Albine (1747) and Tournon (1782) to rethink the creative process, as most debates ignored the phenomenology of acting. The Actor-Man, made up of his emotions, internal life and habitual spaces, was increasingly seen as a variable in the performance: he was part of an event that had its own uncertainties and constraints, and depended on contingencies.

Yet, Diderot, who discussed personal sensitivity in great depth, argued that the theatrical illusion resulted from a sharp separation between the actor-person (identity and being) and the actor-

character. Actors had to control themselves at all times, never merging with the character. They had to disengage emotionally and be impermeable to other worlds, creating barriers instead of junctions. Although Diderot did not explicitly discuss the idea of a multiverse in the theatre, his views were conducive to it. A probably invented anecdote about Henri Louis Lekain reveals the points of contact between different realities: "Le Kain-Ninias goes down into his father's tomb, he slits his mother's throat; he leaves it with bloody hands. He is filled with horror, his limbs twitch, his eyes go astray. [...] However, Le Kain-Ninias pushes with his foot towards the backstage a diamond earring which had come off the ear of an actress."[19] The actor navigates two dimensions, managing two spaces at the same time: the performance itself (hence the focus on the jewel) and the performance of the role, that requires an internal virtual reality activated from the inside. Two parallel universes are simultaneously in action in the here and now.

Another anecdote relates how the link between these two dimensions can be broken: "At the first performance of *Ines de Castro* the children are brought in and the audience starts to laugh; Duclos, who was doing Ines, is indignant and cries out: Laugh, you, foolish *parterre*, at the most beautiful part of the play! The audience heard her, restrained itself; the actress resumed her role and her tears, and the spectators cried."[20] Although this example aimed to demonstrate the actor's insensitivity, it actually interrogates the actor's mindscapes and concentration during the performance in a very modern way. Indeed, two consciousnesses co-exist: that of the role (the *doing* or the metaverse that generates dramatic embodiment) and, in parallel, that of the self (linked to the outside and present moment).

Diderot does not explain which plays the greater part for the actor: self-consciousness (the actor's identity) or dramatic focus (the actor's performance). Sometimes self-consciousness is diluted as the actor immerses themself in acting, and sometimes it takes control when the actor is refocusing on the present moment. The partners who also are on stage live the same experience. The dialectic of these two consciousnesses, one turned outwards and the other inwards, each following its own tempo, suggests that performance is a journey where different dimensions coordinate, coalesce and interact. The theatrical multiverse *in performance* could therefore be defined as the perfect synchronisation between the dramatic scenario being performed and the real-life situation of the theatrical performance. Actors incorporate their partners' acting in their own consciousness by paying attention to the stage while delivering their lines. This integrated system is necessary to create harmonious teamwork and natural effects – what Stendhal called a "simulacrum of reality" – that could more accurately be characterised as "transverse" effects – the circulation and transfer of energy and emotions from one parallel universe to another. This inner transfer is emphasised in Mlle Clairon's *Mémoires*:

> When she entered the room where I was, I saw only an old woman, announcing nothing of the imposing nature I feared to find; badly coiffed, shabbily dressed, with no other demeanour than that of insouciance. [...] Finally, she agreed to rehearse the scene from Electra in the third act [...] The air of dignity she took on as she rose, arranging chairs to make a theatre and backstage area for herself, the change I saw in her whole being as she was about to speak, also changed all my ideas [...] and when she spoke, the tones of her despair, the deep pain in her face, the noble and true abandonment of her whole being, came together in my soul to penetrate it.[21]

This anecdote portrays a transfiguration. It reveals an inner creative process that begins before speaking, existing beyond the lines. Little by little, a presence and a double resonance unfold in

and from Mlle de Seine: what the actor inspires in herself and what she inspires in Mlle Clairon. This moment symbolises the exact junction between the universes that Mlle de Seine passes through, moving from one to the other. This new, palpable but invisible creative space is perceived and felt by the spectator.

The actor acts and reacts to a phenomenon, to a living matter: immediacy. Examining the creative process, theorists claimed that instead of keeping the two inner universes separated as we have seen, actors had to create a third space made up of the author's universe and the actor's own creation. Such a space constituted the subtext or off-text. Tournon claimed that the actor had to become immersed in the character's state, act and speak in their place.[22] The very modern concept of inner illusion during the performance developed by this philosopher meant that actors had to intentionally change their mental state so that this could lead to a modification of consciousness. The inner illusion helped create an intersectional space connecting the self and the creative intra-universes. In this sense, in the eighteenth century, the artistry of the actor was acknowledged. Acting was no longer considered to be a mere reproduction of the script, but as a work and a creative process that involved a subjective transformation of the text (a different work from that of the author, as well as that performed by another actor), and a transposition of the text into reality. Conceptually, the Actor was increasingly seen as a junction point where the play – that is, scenes and lines – transited artistically, through minds and bodies – in fact, through the activated universes of the actors performing together on stage.

To sum up, while the universe of each individual intersects every day in the realm of the phenomenal, the theatrical stage, and in particular the performance, purposely aggregates a series of complex multidimensional creative processes that form a multiverse. These processes develop both linearly – that is, from the writing of the play to its first run – and cyclically, as symbolised by rehearsals or revivals, for instance; simultaneously internally and externally (the inner construction of the character versus the person on the stage); and across different times that overlap and converge: that of consciousness and its stream, and that of the performance itself.

Reflecting on his different roles as actor, director of the Comédie-Française and set designer, Eric Ruff states that he has a 360° vision of the show as he organises, observes and performs.[23] He argues that creative activity is comparable to mathematics, being "caught up in such a bundle of constraints, expectations and presuppositions that it is not as natural and free as one might think at first sight."[24] In the theatre, a creative team is composed of multiple participants including stage director, actors, set designer(s), costume designer(s) and technicians. Despite all facing different challenges and their worlds sometimes threatening to collide, they manage to work together towards the creation of the play. Thus, the performance and its constituents form a work in progress and are traversed by different invisible inner mindscapes that assemble, coalesce and interact in the here and now during preparatory meetings, brainstorming sessions, staging and acting – and beyond, through minds, collective memory and history.

The stage is presented nowadays as a laboratory, workshop or continuous training venue.[25] Actors are creative participants in the evolving and variegated multidimensional theatre world, standing at the heart of disparate realities and polymorphous virtual realities that question the spaces of theatre-making as we generally understand them. As a result, live performances seem more complex than ever, the outcome of human and, nowadays, technological worlds that intersect and interconnect. Acting combines different infinite possibilities created not only by the impermanent

and ephemeral nature of performance, but also by the extension of the material universe in the actors' minds; by the multiple simultaneous interpretations of a scene and different characters by different actors – for example, when scenes are blocked, or through time as evidenced by the palimpsests of a performance;[26] and by the streams of consciousness that can create alternative realities and place the actors at the centre of different worlds during the performance. Roles are continuously composed and de-composed on and off-stage, through different minds and selves. Hence the idea of the multiple is constitutive of the theatre.

The Diderotian imaginary model aims at embroidering the character in the interstices of the actors' minds, and imbuing the consciousness and the self with the spirit of the role. In the players' mindscapes, creation is freed from the pitfalls of the theatrical performance. However, every performance engages not only the physical, but also the 'being there' of the actors, who follow the flow of the now and here. The actors are doubly engaged on stage: in the dramatic situation (the plot and the lines to be performed) and in the stage situation (what is happening on stage). The actors juggle with their inner world and the reality outside them; with the character and their relation to the role; with their own beings – their outer appearances and psychological states. Acting a live performance is about assembling and coordinating all these elements, or at least making them coincide. In 1801, Mauduit Larive compared this concept with an electrical current that spreads from the stage to the auditorium once these inner landscapes are all in tune – one may say, when invisible transverse effects are perceptible.[27]

Acting, which might appear to be a 'scattering of being' or a constant flow of inner and outer movements to deal with multiple and coexisting parameters, finds a unity during the live performance, thanks to the actor's state. Optimal concentration allows for adaptability to stage situations, flexibility and reactivity in acting, and therefore gives impetus and energy to the multiverse *in motion*. Performing, seen through the prism of early modern theories – and revisited from a modern perspective – could be defined as playing simultaneously with related but disjointed universes, staged and activated by the mind and mediated by consciousness. Indeed, the theatrical multiverse has the particularity of combining different minds in one universe and one time, and in several virtual realities and times. In this way, it symbolises the very idea of junction (space) and juncture (time).

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1. Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares* (New York: Routledge), 1936, 11.

2. *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/multiverse (accessed 3 June 2022).

3. *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/universe?q=UNiverse (accessed 3 June 2022).

4. Ibid.

5. Sabine Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien. Déclamation et jeu scénique en France à l'âge Classique (1620-1680)* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

6. Sylvaine Guyot and Clotilde Thouret, "Des émotions en chaîne: Représentation théâtrale et circulation publique des affects au xviie siècle," *Littératures classiques*, 68:1 (2009), 225.

7. Louis Charpentier, *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre* (Paris: Dufour, 1758), 66. All translations are mine.

8. Ibid., 78-9.

9. See Chaouche, *L'Art du comédien*.

10. See Sabine Chaouche, *La Philosophie de l'Acteur. La dialectique de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur dans les écrits sur l'art théâtral français. 1738-1801* (Paris: Champion, 2007).

11. Denis Diderot, "Observations sur une brochure intitulée *Garrick ou les Acteur anglais*," in his *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* (Paris: Garnier, 1879), Vol. 9, 137. My translation.

12. Julia Dobson, "The Staging of the Self: The Theatre and Helene Cixous," *New Readings*, 2 (1996), 21-36, at 24.

13. Hélène Cixous, "Hors Cadre Interview," trans. Verena Andermatt Conley, in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 29-39, at 36. See also William McEvoy, "'Leaving a Space for the Non-theorizable': Self and Other in Hélène Cixous's Writing for the Theatre," *The European Legacy*, 14:1 (2009), 19-30.

14. Hélène Cixous, "De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire: Chemin d'une écriture," in *Hélène Cixous, chemins d'une écriture*, eds Françoise van Rossum-Guyon and Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz (Paris: PUV and Rodopi, 1990), 28.

15. Hélène Cixous, "Qui es-tu?," in her *L'Indiade, ou l'Inde de leurs rêves et quelques écrits sur le théâtre* (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil, 1987), 270.

16. Expression used by philosopher Daniel Dennett about the Cartesian theatre (analogy of the mind to a theatre).

17. Attrib. to Abbot Guyot-Desfontaine, *Lettre d'un comédien français* (Paris: Vve Pissot, 1728), 68-70 (translation of an extract from *Dell'arte rappresentativa* by Luigi Riccoboni).

18. Sabine Chaouche, "Expressionist Acting. Paroxysmal Emotions at Play on the Late 18th-Century French Stage," *European Drama and Performance Studies*, 17:2 (2021), 97-124.

19. Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 76-7.

20. Diderot, "Observations," 150.

21. Mlle Clairon, *Mémoires et Réflexions sur l'art dramatique* (Paris: Buisson, 1798), 140-1.

22. Attrib. to Tournon de la Chapelle, *L'Art du comédien vu dans ses principes* (Amsterdam and Paris: Cailleau & Duchesne, 1782), 111.

23. Eric Ruf, "Réflexions sur la création et ses processus," *European Drama and Performance Studies*, 13:2 (2019), 265.

24. Ibid.

25. Josette Féral, "Did You Say 'Training'?," *Performance Research*, 14:2 (2009), 16-25.

26. Established traditions are often challenged and lead to new acting styles and staging; historical and cultural contexts differ in time and space, leading to new interpretations of the same text.

27. Jean Mauduit Larive, *Réflexions sur l'art théâtral* (Paris: Rondonneau, 1801), 317.