

Jacques Ranciere

The Emancipated Spectator

I gave to this talk the title: « 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 which seem at first sight to bear no direct relation on each other. In a sense, this title expresses the perplexity that was mine when Marten Spangberg invited me to deliver what is supposed to be the “keynote” lecture of this academy. He told me that he wanted me to introduce this collective reflection on “spectatorship”, because he had been impressed by my book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I first wondered what kind of relationship there could be between the cause and the effect ? This an academy bringing together artists and people involved in the world of art , theatre and performance on the issue of spectatorship to-day. *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 19th century, made a mess in the academic world by asserting that an ignorant could teach another ignorant what he did not know himself , proclaiming the equality of intelligences and calling for intellectual emancipation against the standard idea of the instruction of the people. His theory sank in oblivion in the middle of the 19th century. I thought it necessary to revive it in the 1980's in order to put a new kind of mess in the debate about Education and its political stakes. But what use can be made, in the contemporary artistic debate, of a man whose artistic universe could be epitomized by names such as Demosthenes, Racine and Poussin?

On second thoughts, I thought that the very distance, the lack of any obvious relationship between Jacotot's theory and the issue of spectatorship to-day could be a chance. It could provide the opportunity of taking a radical distance from the theoretical and political presuppositions which still shore up, even in postmodern disguise , most of the debate on theatre , performance and spectatorship . I got the impression that it was possible to make sense of the relationship , on condition that we try to piece together the network of presuppositions that put the issue of spectatorship at a strategic cross point in the discussion of the relationship between art and politics and draw the global pattern of rationality on the background of which we have been addressing for a long time the political issues of theatre and spectacle . I am using here those terms in a very general sense , including dance , performance and all the kinds of spectacle performed by acting bodies in front of a collective audience.

The numerous debates and polemics that had called the theatre into question all along our history can be traced back to a very simple contradiction. Let us call it the paradox of the spectator, a paradox which may prove more crucial than the well-known paradox of the actor. This paradox can be summed up in very simple terms. There is no theatre without spectators (were it only a single and hidden one , as in Diderot's fictional representation of *Le Fils naturel*) . But spectatorship is a bad thing . Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing , for two reasons . Firstly looking is put as the opposite of knowing. It means being in front of an appearance without knowing the conditions of production of that appearance or the reality which is behind it. Secondly, looking is put as the opposite of acting. He or she who looks at the spectacle remains motionless on his or her seat, without any power of intervention.

Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing in the same way as he is separated from the possibility of acting.

From that diagnosis it is possible to draw two opposing conclusions. The first one is that theatre in general is a bad thing, that is the stage of illusion and passivity which has to be dismissed in favour of what it forbids : knowledge and action : the action of knowing and the action led by knowledge . This conclusion has been drawn long ago by Plato: the theatre 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 theatre is nothing but the transmission of that disease through another disease, the disease of the empirical vision which looks at shadows. Theatre is the transmission of the ignorance which makes people ill through the medium of ignorance which is optical illusion. Therefore a good community is a community which does not allow the mediation of the theatre, a community whose collective virtues are directly incorporated in the living attitudes of his participants. This seems to be the more logical conclusion of the problem. We know however that it is not the conclusion that was most often drawn. The most usual conclusion runs as follows: theatre involves spectatorship and spectatorship is a bad thing. Therefore we need a new theatre, a theatre without spectatorship . We need a theatre where the optical relation- implied in the word theatron - is subjected to another relation , implied in the word drama . Drama means action. The theatre 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 theatre must be predicated on that acting power. Theatre has to be brought back to its true essence which is the contrary of what is usually known as theatre. What has to be pursued is a theatre without spectators, a theatre 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 their 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 proposed the spectacle of something strange, unusual, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for that strangeness. He must be pressed to switch from the status of the passive viewer to the status of the scientist who observes phenomena and looks for their cause. On the other hand the spectator has to leave the status of a mere observer who remains still and untouched in front of a distant spectacle. He must be dragged away from his delusive mastery, drawn into the magic power of theatrical action where he will exchange the privilege of the rational viewer for the possession of its true vital energies.

We acknowledge those two paradigmatic attitudes epitomized by Brecht's epic theatre and Artaud's theatre of cruelty. On the one hand, the spectator has to become more distant , on the other hand he has to loose any distance. On the one hand he has to change his look for a better look, on the other hand he has to leave the very position of the viewer. The project of reforming the theatre ceaselessly wavered between these two poles of distant inquiry and vital embodiment. This means that the presuppositions which underpin the search for a new theatre are the same which underpinned the dismissal of theatre. The reformers of the theatre in fact resumed the terms of Plato's polemics. They only rearranged them by borrowing from the platonician dispositif

another idea of the theatre. Plato opposed to the poetic and democratic community of the theatre a "true" community : a choreographic community where nobody remains a motionless spectator, where everybody is moving according to the communitarian rhythm which is determined by the mathematical proportion.

The reformers of the theatre restaged the platonic opposition between choreia and theatre as an opposition between the true living essence of the theatre and the simulacrum of the "spectacle". The theatre 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 the text introducing the topic of our academy we can read that " theatre remains the only place of direct confrontation of the audience with itself as a collective". We can give to the sentence a restrictive meaning that would merely contrast the collective audience of the theatre with the individual visitors of an exhibition or the sheer collection of individuals looking at a movie. But obviously the sentence means much more. It means that "theatre" 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 German romanticism, the concept of theatre has been associated with that idea of the living community. Theatre 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 which stands before any kind of political form and institution : community as a performing body instead of an apparatus of forms and rules . In that way theatre was associated with the romantic idea of the aesthetic revolution: the idea of a revolution which would not only change laws and institutions but transform the sensory forms of human experience . The reform of theatre thus meant the restoration of its authenticity as an assembly or a ceremony of the community. Theatre is an assembly where the people become aware of their situation and discuss their own interests, Brecht will say after Piscator . Theatre is the ceremony where the community is given the possession of its own energies, Artaud will state. If theatre is put as an equivalent of the true community, the living body of the community opposed to the illusion of the mimesis , it comes as no surprise that the attempt at restoring Theatre in its true essence take place on the very background of the critique of the spectacle .

What is the essence of the 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-platonician. Obviously the main source for the critique of the spectacle is Feuerbach's critique of religion . It is what sustains that critique, namely the romantic idea of truth as unseparateness . But that idea itself still keeps in line with the platonician disparagement of the mimetic image . The contemplation that Debord denounces is the theatrical or mimetic contemplation, the contemplation of the suffering which is provoked by division. "Separation is the alpha and the omega of the theatre". What man contemplates in this scheme is the activity that has been stolen to 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.

In such a way there is no contradiction between the search for a theatre achieving its own essence and the critique of the spectacle. The "good" theatre is posited as a theatre that uses its separate reality 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 this intellectual dispositif which keeps in line, even in the name of the theatre , with the platonician dismissal of the theatre . This dispositif still sets to work some ground ideas which have

to be brought back into question. More precisely what has to be questioned is the very footing on which those ideas are based . It is a whole set of relations , resting on some key equivalences and some key oppositions : equivalence of theatre and community , of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation , mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between 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 . Theatre is charged with making spectators passive while its very essence is supposed to consist in the self-activity of the community . As a consequence it sets itself the task of reversing its 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 theatre . They propose to the collective audience performances intended to teach the spectators how they can stop to be spectators and become performers of a collective activity . Either, according to the Brechtian paradigm, the theatrical mediation makes them aware of the social situation on which it rests itself and prompts them to act in consequence. Or, according to the Artaudian scheme it makes them leave the position of spectators : instead of being in front of a spectacle, they are surrounded by the performance , dragged into the circle of the action which gives them back their collective energy. In both cases the theatre is a self-suppressing mediation.

This is the point where the descriptions and propositions of intellectual emancipation can get into the picture and help us reframe it. Obviously this idea of a self-suppressing mediation is well-known to us. It is exactly the process which 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 has to reinstate it ceaselessly. In order to replace ignorance by the adequate knowledge, he must always run one step ahead of the ignorant who loses his ignorance. The reason for this is simple: in the pedagogical scheme, the ignorant is not only the one who does not know what he does not know. He is 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 exactly knows 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 part of knowledge after another part : a word after another word , a rule or a theorem after another . This part of knowledge is supposed to be exactly conveyed from the master's mind or the page of the book into 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 which 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 and the way of the master, the metaphor of a radical break between two intelligences.

The master cannot ignore that the so-called "ignorant" who is in front of him knows in fact a lot of things, that he has learnt on his own , by looking and listening around him , by figuring out the meaning of what he has seen and heard , repeating what he has

heard and known by chance, comparing what he discovers with what he already knew and so on . He cannot ignore that the ignorant has made by this way the apprenticeship which is the condition of any other : the apprenticeship of his mother tongue. But for him 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 that he observes and reproduces. The role of the master is to break with that process of groping by hit-and-miss . 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 able of understanding , with respect to its age or its social background and social destination. The first 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 first knowledge that he transmits to the student: the knowledge that he has to be explained to in order to understand, the knowledge that he cannot understand on his own. It is the knowledge of his incapacity. In that 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 learnt his mother tongue , as he has learnt to venture through the forest of things and signs which 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 made by chance . If the “ignorant” who does not know how to read , knows only one thing by heart, be it a simple prayer, he can compare this knowledge with something that he still ignores : the words of the same prayer written on a paper. He can learn, sign after sign, the resemblance of what he ignores with what 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 this ignorant up to the scientist which builds hypotheses, it is always the same intelligence which is at work: an intelligence which makes figures and comparisons in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and to understand what another intelligence tries 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 that other 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 any communication. It is not a gap which calls for an expert in the art of suppressing it. The distance that the “ ignorant” has to cover is not the gap between his ignorance and the knowledge of the master . It is the way between what he already knows and what he still does not know but can learn by the same process. To help him to cover it, the “ignorant master” needs not be ignorant. He only has to 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 tell what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to check 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 casual one . Each intellectual act weaves a casual thread between an ignorance and a knowledge .No kind of social hierarchy can be predicated on that sense of distance. What is the relevance of this story with respect to the question of the spectator? We are no more in the times when the dramaturges wanted to explain to their audience the truth about social relations and the good way to do away with domination. But it is not enough to loose his own illusions . On the contrary it often happens that the loss of their illusions lead the dramaturges 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 common world. This is the first point that the reformers of the theatre share with the stultifying pedagogues : the idea of the gap between two positions. Even when the dramaturge or the performer does not know what he wants the spectator to do, he knows at least that he has to do something: switching 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 which 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 which always is behind the image? Why identify hearing with being passive, if not by the presupposition that acting is the opposite of speaking , etc, etc.? All those oppositions – looking/knowing, looking/acting, appearance/reality , activity/passivity are much more than logical oppositions. They are what I can call a partition of the sensible, a distribution of the places and of the capacities or the 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 body. But it is easy to turn matters around by stating that they who act, they who work with their body are obviously inferior to those who are able to look: 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 the 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 also is an action which confirms or modifies that distribution , and that “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it . The spectator is active, as the student or the scientist : he observes, he selects , compares, interprets. He ties up what he observes with many other things that he has observed on other stages , in other kind 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 which is in front of her. This also means if she is able to undo the performance , for instance to deny the corporeal energy that it is supposed to convey here in the present and transform it into a mere image , if she can link it with something that she has read in a book or dreamt about a story , that she has lived or fancied. They 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 poem 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 sets in the same presupposition as the stultifying master: the presupposition of an equal, undistorted transmission. The master presupposes that what the student learns is the same thing as what he teaches to him. It is what is involved in the idea of transmission: there is something - a knowledge, a capacity, an energy - which is on one side, in one mind or one body- and that must be transferred onto the other side, into the other's mind or body. The presupposition is that the process of learning is not only the effect of its cause -teaching - but that it is the transmission of the cause : what the student learns is the knowledge of the master. That identity of the cause and the effect is the principle of stultification . On the contrary ,the principle of emancipation is the dissociation of the cause and the effect. The paradox of the ignorant master lies there. The student of the ignorant master learns what his master does not know, since his master commands it to look for and to tell everything that he finds out on the way and 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 or the performer does not want to "teach" something, indeed. There is some distrust today regarding the idea of using the stage as a way of teaching . They only want to bring about a form of awareness or a force of feeling or action. But they still make the supposition that what will be felt or understood will be what they have put in their own dramaturgy or performance. They presuppose the equality - meaning the homogeneity - of the cause and the effect. As we know, this equality rests on an inequality. It rests on the presupposition that there is a good knowledge and good practice of the "distance" and of the means of suppressing it. Now the distance takes on two forms. There is the distance between the performers and the spectators. But there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, as it stands as a "spectacle" between the idea of the artist and the feeling and interpretation of the spectator. This spectacle is a third thing , to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of "equal" or "undistorted" transmission. It is a mediation between them. 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 which links them must separate them. Jacotot posited the book as that in-between thing. The book is that material thing, foreign to both the master and the student, where they can verify what the student has seen, what he has told about it, what he thinks of what he has told. This means that the paradigm of intellectual emancipation is clearly opposed to another idea of emancipation on which the reform of theatre has often been predicated : the idea of emancipation as the re-appropriation of a self which 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 puts its human essence out of him 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 men 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 theatre predicated on that idea of the spectacle conceives the externality of the stage as a kind of transitory state which 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 else than in a theatre . For sure many improvements of the theatrical performance resulted from that breaking of the traditional distribution of the places. But the “redistribution” of the places is one thing, the demand that the theatre achieve, as its essence, the gathering of an unseparate community, is another thing . The first one means the invention of new forms of intellectual adventure, the second means a new form of platonic assignment of the bodies to their good place, their “communal” place. This presupposition against mediation is connected with a third one: the presupposition that the essence of the theatre is the essence of the community. The spectator is supposed to be redeemed when he is no more an individual , when he is restored to the status of a member of a community, when he is carried in the 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 must do as a collective, the more he knows that they must become a collective, turn their addition into the community that they virtually are. It is high time, I think, to bring back into question the idea of the theatre as a specifically communitarian place. It is supposed to be such a place because , on the stage, real living bodies give the performance 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 individuals watching on the TV or the spectators of a movie who are in front of mere projected images. Strange as it may seem, the generalization of the use of the images and of all kinds of media in theatrical performances didn't change the presupposition. Images may take the place of living bodies. But, as long as the spectators are gathered here, the living and communitarian essence of the theatre appears to be saved so that it seems possible to escape the question: what does specifically happen between the spectators of a theatre which would not happen elsewhere? Is there something more interactive, more common to them than to the individuals who look at the same time the same show on their TV?

I think that this “something” is just the presupposition that the theatre is communitarian by itself . That presupposition of what “theatre” means always runs ahead of the performance and predates its actual effects. But in a theatre, or in front of a performance, just as in a museum, a school or a street, there are only individuals, weaving their own way in the forest of words, acts and things that stand in front of them or around them. The collective power which is common to the spectators is not the status of members of a collective body. Nor is it a peculiar kind of interactivity. It is the power of translating in their own way what they are looking at. It is the power to connect it with the intellectual adventure which makes any of them similar to any other in so far as his or her way does not look like any other. The common power is the power of the equality of intelligence. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that it keeps them apart from each other, able to weave with the same power their own way. What has to be put to test by our performances – whether it be teaching or performing, speaking , writing, doing art , etc, is not the capacity of aggregation of a collective . It is the capacity of the anonyms, the capacity which 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 which conveys the knowledge or the 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 the passivity has to 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 dreamt. There is no privileged medium as there is no privileged starting point. There are everywhere starting points and knot points from which we learn something new, if we dismiss firstly the presupposition of the distance, secondly the distribution of the roles, thirdly the borders between the territories. We have not to turn spectators into actors. We have to acknowledge that any spectator already is an actor of his own story and that the actor also is the spectator of the same kind of story. We have not to turn the ignorant into learned persons, or, according to a mere scheme of overturn, make the student or the ignorant the master of his masters.

Let me make a little detour through my own political and academic experience. I belong to a generation which was poised between two competing statements: according to the first, those who had the intelligence of the social system had to teach it to those who suffered from it and would act in order to overthrow that system; according to the second, the supposed learned persons in fact were ignorant: as they knew nothing of what exploitation and rebellion were, they had to become the students of the so-called ignorant workers. Therefore I tried to re-elaborate Marxist theory in order to give its theoretical weapons to a new revolutionary movement, then to learn from those who worked in the fabrics what exploitation and rebellion meant. For me, as for many other people in my generation, none of those attempts proved really successful. That's why I decided to look in the history of the worker's movement for the reason of all the mismatches between the workers and the intellectuals who had come and visited them, in order either to instruct them or to be instructed by them. I was lucky enough to find out that it was not a matter of relationship between knowledge and ignorance, no more than between knowing and acting or individuality and community. One day in May, during the 70's, as I was looking at a worker's letters from the 1830's in order to find what the condition and the consciousness of workers was at the time, I found out something quite different: the adventures of two visitors, on another day in another time of May, one hundred and forty years before. One of the two correspondents had just been introduced into the utopian community of the saint-simonians and he told his friend the schedule of his days in utopia: works, exercises, games, choirs and stories. His friend in turn told him the story of a country party that he had just done with two other workers in order to enjoy his last Sunday leisure. But it was not the usual Sunday leisure of the worker restoring his physical and mental forces for the following week of work. It was in fact a breakthrough into another kind leisure: the leisure of the aesthetes who enjoy the forms, lights and shades of Nature, of the philosophers who spend their time exchanging metaphysical hypotheses in a country inn and of the apostles who set out to communicate their faith to the chance companions they meet in any inn. Those workers who should have provided me information about the conditions of labour and the forms of class-consciousness in the 1830's provided in fact something quite different: a sense of likeness or equality: they too were spectators and visitors amidst their own class. Their activity as propagandists could not be torn apart from their "passivity" as mere strollers and contemplators. The chronic of their leisure meant a reframing of the very relationship between doing, seeing and saying. As they became "spectators", they overthrew the 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 they who look and they who act, they who are individuals and they who are members of a collective body. What those "days" brought

them was not the knowledge and energy for a 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, dooming the workers to do nothing of their night but restoring their forces to work the next day .

Understanding the sense of that break in the heart of Time also meant setting to work another kind of knowledge, predicated not on the presupposition of the gap but on the presupposition of likeness. They too were intellectuals, as anybody is. They were visitors and spectators, just as the researcher who, one hundred and forty years after was reading their letters in a library, just as the visitors in Marxist theory or at the gates of the fabrics. 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 at play in the very production of knowledge. Putting it at play meant two things. Firstly, it meant refusing the borders between the disciplines. Telling the (hi)story of those days and those 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 . In order to show what it meant, I had to put it in direct relation with the theoretical discourse of the philosopher , namely Plato, who had told , very long ago , in his Republic , the same story by explaining that in a well-ordered community everybody had to do only one thing , his own business, and that workers anyway had no time to stand in another place than their workplace and do anything but the job fitting the (in)capacity that Nature had given them. Philosophy then could no more appear as the 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 the reason of the story or the truth lying behind or beneath the story. There was no metadiscourse telling the truth about 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 the translation possible. I had to use that idiom to tell my own intellectual adventure, at the risk that the idiom remain "unreadable" for all those who wanted to know the cause of the story, its true meaning or the lesson for action that could be drawn out of it . I had to produce a discourse that would be readable only for they 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. Those issues of crossing the borders and blurring the distribution of the roles come up with the actuality of the theatre and the actuality of contemporary art, where all artistic competences step out of their own field and exchange their places and powers with all others. We have theatre plays without words and dance with words; installations and performances instead of "plastic" works ; videoprojections turned into cycles of frescoes; photographs turned into living pictures or history paintings; sculpture which becomes hypermediatic show, etc., etc. Now there are three ways of understanding and practising that 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 actually proves to be the apotheosis of some strong artistic egos or the apotheosis of a kind of hyperactivist consumerism, if not both at the same time. There is the idea of a "hybridisation" of the

means of art , which would fit in with a new age of mass individualism viewed of as an age of relentless exchange between roles and identities, between reality and virtuality , life and mechanical prostheses, etc. In my view, this second interpretation ultimately leads to the same as the first one. It leads to another kind of hyperactivist consumerism, another kind of stultification , using the crossing of the borders or the confusion of the roles only as a means of increasing the power of the performance without questioning its grounds.

The third way – the good way in my view – does not aim for the amplification of the effect but for the transformation of the cause/ effect scheme itself, the dismissal of the set of oppositions which 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 theatre that makes it in fact an allegory of inequality . The crossing of the borders and the confusion of the roles should not lead to some sort of “hypertheatre” turning spectatorship into activity by turning representation to presence. On the contrary, it should question the theatrical privilege 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 performances would be translated into one another. In all those performances in fact , it is 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 visitors or spectators who are looking for what those competences may produce in a new context , among unknown people. Artists, just as 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 as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.

I am aware that all this may sound as : words, mere words. But I would not hear this as an insult . We have heard so many speakers passing off their words as more than words, as passwords enabling us to enter a new life . We have seen so many spectacles boasting on being no more spectacles but ceremonials of community. Even now, in spite of the so-called postmodern scepticism about changing life, we can see so many shows turned to religious mysteries that it might not seem outrageous to hear that words are only words . Breaking away with 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 where we are living.

Jacques Rancière
Frankfurt , August 2004

Reliquia
Association and dissociation versus being the medium of an aggregation of a collective around its true knowledge or energy

(the link with the ignorance of the performer; cf my practice of the knowledge of the ignorant) la séance Gauny ; the voyage ;

(community against equality)

(the collective power in everybody)

The idea of the community of translators ; the role of translation ; the staging of non-theatrical texts ; the reintroduction of narration and text in choreography . the transformation of theatrical texts ; the suppression of the text; the mixing-up of living bodies and images, etc... (different from the "communitarian idea" Putting together things which re not supposed to be put together)

The fetishism of action and the fetishism of knowledge . School and theatre.

Reliquia

(the pedagogical relation : the exercises of consciousness and energy ; the circle : the suppression of the relation that constitutes theatre or school; the institution that works on the presupposition of its self-suppression , which is the suppression of the distance ; the infinite exercise of reproducing the distance "by" suppressing it)

The place of the presupposition of "equality in transmission" ; the knot between equality and inequality.

Reforming the theatre on the background of the critique of the spectacle, this means using the mediation of theatrical representation in order to dismiss the theatre as a separate form, as an "artistic" form.[According to Guy Debord "art is the common language of social inaction".]

true presence, true movement against the evil which is division, mediation, representation

(the actors as the relation of the audience to itself; the choir; the theatre as another assembly of the people)

the idea of the true community ; Brecht the popular meeting against social exploitation, Artaud the collective ritual against the disease of civilisation)

(the paradigm of incorporation ; cf Plato/Debord)

The presuppositions : presence of the community to itself (the unseparate body of the community)

Exteriority as simulacrum

Mediation as separation

Equal transmission (whether it be good or wrong)

Position of mastery (the master is the expert in terms of "equal transmission")

We should never forget this first statement of the issue which still underpins in fact all the critiques of theatre and all the wills to change theatre. Theatre is the transmission of the disease of passivity through the disease of looking. It is easy to find this original pattern underpinning theories as different as Brecht's epic theatre or Artaud's "theatre de la cruauté" . What Brecht stigmatizes is the theatrical illusion which keeps the spectator in a state of hypnotism and passivity. And he calls for an active spectator, meaning a knowledgeable spectator who refuses identification takes distance from what he sees and asks why it is so . What Artaud disparages is a theatrical practice which leaves the spectator untouched, passive. And he calls for a spectator who becomes a participant in the magical or hypnotic process of identification. The solutions are opposing but they grapple differently with the same problem : turning the passive spectator- the spectator who only sees - in an active participant, in a persons who truly acts, whether this "true action' is viewed of as a process of rational inquiry or magical possession . We should never forget the radical conclusion that it entails: there is no reform of the theatre, no good theatre. At first sight , we could be tented to say that the debate on the reform of theatre is endless and insoluble because it rests on a biased

footing : it rests on a setting of the issue which has no other logical conclusion than the sheer dismissal of theatre.

That would be nevertheless too simple a conclusion. Arguably there is a paradox if you want to change theatre with theoretical tools targeting in fact its suppression. But what if precisely what is wanted from an art is that it suppresses itself as an art. Let us read Brecht : The theatre that he calls for is a theatre which shows the world in such a way as it appears possible to change it. Such a theatre, he says us, should not be still viewed as an "art" . Let us read Artaud

(the issue of teaching)

It means that the starting point is indifferent. It suffices to learn one thing and relate everything else to it.

The equality of intelligences does not mean (explain : emancipation? The continuity restored; the method of the riddle , the idea of translation , the importance of the book)