Performative and moral issues in the theatrical metaphor

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Three major thinkers of theatre, Erving Goffman, Marvin Carlson and Bruce Wilshire, admit that theatre is an essential and central metaphor for life. Nevertheless, the two main questions of their discussion are, on the one hand, the existence of a range of moral criteria and values that differentiates the two worlds and, on the other, the possibility of defining the threshold between theatre and life.

According to Bruce Wilshire's theory, theatre is an essential and central metaphor for life, since, "when we begin our investigation of human identity in life offstage, we find that the full and natural expression of its conditions are in theatre-like terms". He notes that theatre "has already written large the process by which we become ourselves offstage" and he admits that "life is theatre-like". Considering that we always display ourselves to others, "we must understand something of their response to this display if we would be ourselves"[1]. What blooms onstage under the audience's intense gaze may reveal similar behaviors in similar behavior offstage. At this point, where the theatrical metaphor is transferred from the poetic and rhetoric to a gnoseological dimension, Wilshire will agree with Erving Goffman, who maintains that although the entire "real" world is not a theatre, we can not easily define their difference[2]. In fact, if the point beyond which we can not characterize a situation as a theatrical one is indistinct, then the point of distinction between this situation and the theatre is equally indistinct. Nevertheless, even if Wilshire agrees with the two parts of Goffman's acceptance, namely, that the world is not identified with the theatre and that we can not easily define their difference, he believes that there is a

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[1] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity. The limits of theatre as metaphor*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1991, pp. 243-244.

[2] E. Goffman, *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, 1. *La présentation de soi*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1973, p. 73.

range of moral criteria and values that differentiates the two worlds. Moreover, his criticism of Goffman will begin from this precise range.

If we observe his movements in sequence, we will find that he carefully prepares his steps, examining both aspects of the metaphor through their mutual relations – more or less as Georges Gurvitch had suggested several years earlier: how the world of theatre is related to reality and -at the same time- how reality reveals a theatrical structure[3]. Hence, theatre can complement the non-artistic modes of discovering the world in order that it reveals many aspects of our everyday life, but that it can not clearly reveal is precisely the limits of its ability to reveal[4]. This weakness is due to the fact that in theatre the imaginary element is interwoven with the real element to a certain degree that the similarities between the theatrical and real world seem almost self-evident. We can approach these similarities based on certain central concepts. The first concept that we come across during the theatrical metaphor is that of the "role". Its long-standing and considerably frequent presence does not allow us to discern with certitude in which specific field it is used literally and in which metaphorically. Considering that the concept of the role is used metaphorically in relation to the real world, we should accept that a "companion metaphor" is constantly by its side, that of the general public or of the audience[5]. Not only does the audience "accompany" the role, but the role itself is not even meant without the existence of some spectators viewing its activation and development. However, the development of a role, (and at this point the second companion metaphor is located), also presupposes the existence of a "script", as many sociologists and therapists of the transactional method support. The script is the backbone of the role: I learn a role means that I learn to react to a sequence of anticipated reactions and behaviors, as I act in the framework of a story and a plot. However the scripts are not "written" from the beginning, each time a role is activated, but they pre-exist as stored up experiences and knowledge that have been established by society. These acquired experiences and knowledge are rendered by the third companion metaphor

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[3] G. Gurvitch, "Sociologie du théâtre", *Les Lettres Nouvelles,* 34-36, 1956, pp. 196-210.
[4] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity,* cit., p. 52.
[5] Ivi, p. 259.

of "tape". As Wilshire argues, "tapes of the past" play themselves out in our behavior without our knowing it"[6].

Hence, these central metaphors unite the two worlds while simultaneously projecting their similarities and their analogies. The real world constitutes the substrate of every behavior either onstage or offstage. The theatrical stage is basically as equally real as any other social situation, while a social situation can be mapped as theatrical, as long as it is be framed as such, namely, to be found in a specific manner, in a specific place and time, in order to differentiate itself from the rest of real world.

The difference is that the actor on stage is found in principle within this frame and in general, he already knows that. For this reason he never loses his self-control[7]. Nevertheless, the actor of the social "stage" is always dependent on the place and time of his action, bound by the entire series of the consequences of this action[8]. The framing of his actions always remains on the level of the metaphor. An on stage promise maintains its weight until the curtain falls, while a promise given in a social relation maintains its weight constantly. The doctor of the social stage plays the role of the doctor, following the script of his discipline and the practises of his profession, formulating in time a case and a plot of action, but without having a constant audience attending his specific work and the most important of all, without being protected by some framework of action: the eventual death of one of his patients always binds him morally, if not legally.

Another important difference lies in the relation between the subject and the role. The actor on stage coincides with his role, (even if, as we know, he often does not identify with it), while the actor of the social stage never coincides with one of his roles, nor can he be reduced to any set of roles that he incarnates[9]. The self can be seized in no finite set of performance onstage nor offstage. "The self is that which escapes all final objectification", in part because the objectifications are unpredictables and indefinites, as Wilshire

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[6] Ivi, p. 260.

[7] R. Schechner, "Magnitudes of performance", in R. Schechner, W. Appel (eds), *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 28, 39.

[8] B. Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity,* cit., p. 262.

[9] Ivi, p. 263.

argues, but primarily because, according to the phenomenological thought, conscience as such is an escape from any objectification or definition[10].

An actor is not judged by his life outside the theatre, but solely by the quality of his acting in relation to the role he undertakes. For this reason we say that, he coincides with his role as an actor, but this automatically suggests that he differentiates himself from his role as an individual. However, the same does not apply for the "actor" of the social stage: even if as a free person he exceeds all of his possible roles, nonetheless he cannot be released from the responsibilities resulting from each one individually. Besides some extreme psychopathological cases, no one and nothing could distinguish in him the self and the "performer", and no one and nothing could neither "soften nor confine the consequences of his acts"[11]. In social life maybe we can counterbalance an action of ours, to overshadow some of its aspects or even surpass it, leaving it behind as a memory, however we cannot eliminate its traces that follow us everywhere. If the actor walks on soft soil, the "actor" of everyday life walks on thin sand.

Wilshire cannot say it often enough that, besides the differences he detects, the theatrical metaphor is essential, but he does that in order to cleverly add one more difference. "Nothing we have said", he writes, "obliges us to deny that the role-playing metaphor is an essential one. The concept of "performing" may not apply in toto to all that we do offstage, but it is inescapable in most of everyday life", but he adds below, as he wanted to limit the power of his last phrase that "the press and shock of events are too great, and their outcome is too unpredictable, to adopt a stance of detachment strictly analogous to the actor's toward himself as a character"[12].

Following these steps and initially establishing the existing differentiations between theatrical and social life, Wilshire arrives at the examination of Goffman's theory about the presentations of self in everyday life, as this is developed in this work bearing the same title, but also in his subsequent work about the frame analysis. Primarily, he attributes to

[10] Ivi, p. 266.
[11] Ivi, p. 265.
[12] Ivi, p. 267.

Goffman a nominalistic way of thinking that conceives only particles from the actor's work, that considers him as a being that is constantly playing a role, but he always differentiates himself from the repertoire of these roles. But if the real self is hidden behind the roles then we could either never discover it or we will only see an instant and fragmentary image of it, when the role "slips" for a moment, like the mask from the face. If the only thing we know about the self results only from the management of images it projects towards others -that is from a kind of strategic "misleading"- then life begins to resemble a farce and loses every tragic dimension. What Wilshire maintains is that the distinction between the real self and the performed selves is "artificial and misleading" because, a. "what a self really is involves integrally how it *appears* to be to others"[13], and b. The real self, to the degree where it can become conscious and thus possess the total of the performed selves, but also each one separately, does not coincide with them, but exceeds them chronologically and thematically. I cannot be but all the roles that I perform before others, but what I really am is not limited only to these roles, since there is something that always escapes from all the framings, that exceeds all the performances of self, that finally establishes them as such and that is nothing else but conscience. Conscience is the permanently present spectator of our roles, the critic of every act and omission of ours, this invisible gaze of our gazes, this fleeting thought of our thoughts. Conscience is a power of coherence and a power of transcendence. "Yes", Wilshire will say, "life offstage is a multileveled performance", everywhere in everyday life there are roles and "actors" that embody them, there are the multifaceted and consecutive "appearances" of self; but "there is no substantial or atomic self behind the appearances"[14]. Goffman will agree with this argument, but what he will leave out is that the most important member among the onlookers of my actions is myself as present to myself in all my roles[15].

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[13] Ivi, p. 279.

[14] Ivi, p. 278.

[15] Wilshire writes: "Goffman has left out the most important member of my "audience"—myself, myself as present to myself in all my "roles". He ignores the self-conscious structure of the self, the I-me polarity, one's accumulating and changing sense of one's passing life in

According to Wilshire, the complete distinction between the moral and representative dimension of the action is often difficult yet always real. In some crucial cases of social life, such as when personal dignity, social justice or even human life are at stake, the representativeness only constitutes the surface of things, where ethical dimension is detected within the depths of human relationships. In these cases, the theatrical metaphor weakens as the distance between its two terms broadens. Therefore, the kaleidoscope of social situations, analyzed by Goffman's dramatic vocabulary, can provide a confused image of the relations of theatrical and social life if do not take into serious consideration the ethical criterion that ponders our social actions, and distinguish the behaviors fabricated for the moment to confront an isolated case from those which are accepted in every situation because they have a broad institutional and structural potency. Wilshire insists particularly on this:

> I am responsible for my behavior offstage in fundamentally different ways from my behavior onstage. Ethical responsibility is a condition of the identity of the self; [...] In aestheticizing behavior through his role theory, Goffman contributes to the devitalization of the self. His position, verging on nihilism...[16]

The image given by the number of the footnotes of *Role Playing and Identity* about Sartre is not indicative regarding the presence of the Frenchman in the thinking of the American philosopher. A careful reading of the book would find several points where Wilshire "transfers" the thinking of *L'être et le néant* mainly to his own area and applies it on the speculation of the theatrical metaphor. A similar reading strays from the objectives of the present essay, but we can simply mention the thematic references of bad faith, of prefabricated roles, of the corporal "intervention" in the relations of self with the other, of the negative character of the conscience, as well as and the subject's transcendence. Thus, when we ascertain from Wilshire's reading that the social person is the total of the selves projecting to others, but it is not coincide with it, we can discern behind his words the similar

all its episodes, the time-spanning consciousness of self that are integral to the self itself" (Ivi, p. 279).

[16] Ivi, p. 280.

standpoint of Sartre, that the subject is his body and simultaneously something more than his body and, even more, that between the subject and his roles there a "nil", which is nevertheless enough to create a void. The act of representation is placed on this void: if the subject pretends to be someone else, he is automatically not this other person[17]. When we read that "we cannot be reduced to a set of 'roles'" and that "we exist over an abyss of possibility and freedom"[18], we listen to the words of the French existentialist regarding the subject's transcendence, the possibilities of free choice an individual has, allowing him to be himself and at the same time getting substantially away from himself, and thus be self-defined as pour-soi. Finally, Wilshire's view that "the person *is* the activity that composes the experiences beyond the local environments"[19] and that the transcendental conscience is not one more role, an after-role, but a constant elusive and incomprehensible self-meditativeness of conscience, is clearly based on Sartre's view that conscience is not exhausted to its objects nor to its choices and obviously refers us to the concepts of the phenomenological deduction, where the conscience and the role-as-the-object-of-the-conscience constitute an incomplete and deficient relation. In general, behind the thought that is developed throughout *Role Playing and Identity,* lies the fundamental position of Sartre according to which the partial choices and the current roles adopted by the subject constitute part of a greater game, within which the subject finds various ways to express his desire about acting, responsible action, namely his desire to exist on the basis of freedom and risk[20].

This concept of risk invite us to combine Wilshire's moral approach of phenomenological direction with other criticisms regarding Goffman's work, stemming from the field of sociology, for instance, Judith Butler's criticism, which rejects the objective existence of roles and underlines their artificial

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[17] J-P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, Gallimard, Paris 1986, p. 96.
[18] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity,* cit., p. 282.
[19] Ivi, p. 283.
[20] J-P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, cit., p. 641.

construction based on social regulations[21], that of Christopher Lash, according to which, the analysis of the representative self in everyday life ignores the psychological depth of social association[22] or even the one of Richard Sennett, who supports that Goffman is primarily interested in the converging and counterbalancing trends in the framework of social relationships and neglects the powers of disorder, disorganization and change[23]. From this point of view, the stages Goffman describes are related to the third phase of the social drama, according to Victor Turner's theory, namely, with the efforts of mediatory and redressive actions of the crisis[24]. This discloses an anthropological view taken in advance, according to which individuals always seek to establish a status of balance rather than one of suspense, they move with centripetal rather than centrifugal actions and for this reason they proceed to mutual compromises.

The desire to act and risk, the psychological depth and the powers of disorder and change are the concepts missing from the "dramatic" map of Goffman's society. The situations of the roles described by the sociologist often give the impression that despite any oppositions or contestations that may be expressed at the beginning of the meetings, ultimately convergence and consent will prevail over the actions of individuals and groups. Thus, the sense of high existentialist tension, which is noted by Sartre between the subject and the other, is lost, as Lash puts it, the complex mental processes that often take place during social gatherings are also lost and, in default of these procedures, the consenting relationships can more easily prevail over the conflicting ones, as stated by Sennett.

The truth is that the notions Goffman uses are not appropriate for these kinds of approaches required by the above scholars. However, it should be noted that, at least as far as Wilshire's criticism is concerned, Goffman is

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[21] J. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", in S-E. Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990, p. 279.
[22] C. Lash, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), Nisides, Athens (n.d.), p. 98.
[23] R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Nefeli, Athens 1999, p. 257.
[24] V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York 1982, pp. 68-72. See also his study: "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?", in R. Schechner, W. Appel (eds.), *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, cit.

not interested in constituting a generalized theory of social relations and for this reason his conclusions are not referenced on a universal level, but are approaches and descriptions of individual relations on the level of the focused meetings or the situated activity systems[25]. Certainly, these descriptions, to the degree that they only focus on the social self as a vehicle of a pre-established role, seem quite formalistic, but do not aim at the aestheticization of social behavior in any way. We should keep in mind that the raising of the limits between the theatre and social life is not attempted anywhere in his work. On the contrary, an effort is made, even if it is not systematic, to establish a set of criteria of distinction of the two worlds[26]. Theatrical metaphor and its extensive applications prove that life is theatrelike, but this does not mean that the entire world is a theatre[27]: the theatrelike life makes the limits of the world and that of the theatre indiscernible[28]. If Goffman's analyses allow only a part of the self to be seen, this does not mean that they contribute to the weakening of the self as an entity. Besides, the systematic use of the theatrical metaphor in his work, on the one hand functions as a scaffolding, constituting the framework of a structure that is later removed[29], and on the other hand, it provides an enchanting tour in the empirical places of the individual and collective action, where the subject draws from the reservoirs of social behavior, turning towards some standardized actions, in order to cope with everyday association and arduous competition. Using Goffman's theory about the social roles as a starting point, new horizons could be opened either towards therapy by means of drama, where, as Robert J. Landy supports, the role

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[25] About the concept of the situated activity system, see E. Goffman, *Encounters. Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, The Bobbs-Merill Company Inc, Indianapolis 1961.

[26] E. Goffman, *Les cadres de l'expérience*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1991, pp. 145-150.

[27] According to Blau, "the notion that in life there is nothing but theater", is distressing and maybe crippling. See H. Blau, *Take up the Bodies. Theater at the Vanishing Point*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago 1982, p. 252.

[28] E. Goffman, *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne,* cit., p. 73.

[29] Eli Rozik notes: "The problem is that after taking down the scaffold, the theatrical terminology used in describing the human world still remains and creates an unprecedented phenomenon on language: two realms so intimately related as the world and one of its means of description are categorized by the same words". See E. Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre. Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2002, p. 187.

from a metaphorical notion is perceived as an autonomous one[30], or towards a moral philosophy of social relations, as Wilshire would probably have wished, where the subject is perceived as a spectator of himself, or, finally, towards new and original compositions in a "theatrosociology" field, as Uri Rapp attempted in 1970[31]. In all of the three cases, the theatrological thought has a lot to receive from the broader comprehension of its objects and also a lot to give to the research of the adjacent fields.

The paratheatrical phenomena

Wilshire will insist on the issue regarding limits, and eight years after the publication of *Role Playing and Identity*, his moral speculation, set forth in his book about the moral degradation of universities[32], will be applied again in the field of the theatrical metaphor, with his essay: "The Concept of the Paratheatrical". Paratheatrical performances are all those that violate, one way or another, the impermeability of the limits existing between the theatrical game and the "outside" world, leaving spectators wondering whether the show they are viewing is an artistic performance[33]. The examples that are chosen here are drawn from extreme cases of performances: for instance, Rafael Ortiz's, *The Sky is Falling,* in 1970, a performance referring to the Vietnam War, Chris Burden's, *Shooting Piece* in 1971 or the performance of the Italian experimental group Magazzini Criminali in the middle of the 80s during the Sant' Arcangelo Festival. The violent murders of animals or the performers shooting themselves, as a means of achieving aesthetic goals, remain of a doubtful quality, while on the contrary they create confusion and distress to the audience. For this reason, one could easily define their difference from an artistic performance, setting as a limit for instance, the respect and the protection of life. Thus

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[30] R.J. Landy, *Persona and Performance*, Hellinika Grammata, Athens 2001, p. 62.

[31] U. Rapp, *Handeln und Zuschauen. Untersuchungen uber den theatersoziologischen aspekt in der menschlichen interaktion*, Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, Darmstadt und Neuwied 1973.

[32] B. Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation*, State University of New York Press, New York 1990.

[33] B. Wilshire, "The concept of the paratheatrical", *The Drama Review,* 34, 4, 1990, pp. 169-178 (170).

the question is put expressly: "If human beings are injured", during the performance, "then how can the venture be justified in mere aesthetic terms?"[34]. Of course, there are similar limits in other cases, too, like for instance, in war games or Roman arenas of lethal combat. Nevertheless, a limit does not only separate, but it also directly connects the two parts it separates, since while it denotes the end of one part, it announces the beginning of the other. This double function of limits, however, also allows the development of the theatrical metaphor.

That is why Wilshire admits that "there is an element of performance in all human skills and professions"[35]. In addition, he will note that "if we are to be socialized and human we must always 'perform' in some way, it seems. The urge to blur the line between fiction and fact stems from human life itself"[36]. An expression of this trend sometimes occurs at a cocktail party, where the participants behave as real people, as specific individual personalities and not as fictional people. Therefore, the dividing lines get blurred, but are not eliminated. The possibility that their behavior may contain "disguises" or "masks" does not reduce in the least their real commitment to their interrelations. That means that their behaviors also accompany them after the end of the party. "Hence if we talk of fictionality at the party we must load it with heavy inverted commas to indicate how extraordinarily far we have stretched the term"[37]. Certainly, this remark applies to all the paratheatrical events, as well as to children's mimetic games. In both cases, what is obviously missing and finally differentiates these behaviors from the theatrical activity itself, is the intentional detachment from the self, the premeditated and coordinated distance the actor creates from himself in order to approach and embody his role.

Thus, on the one hand there is the urge for the performativity, while on the other the limits of intentionality and integrity of human existence are set. In this tug of war, the intrinsic human need for action is necessarily interwoven with the "performances" each act presupposes. These

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[34] Ivi, p. 175.
[35] Ivi, p. 174.
[36] Ivi, p. 175.
[37] Ivi, p. 172.

performances offer to the subject a frame, namely, a protected field of action, without which it would run severe risks during its everyday association. Hence for Wilshire, every theatrelike performance, theatrical and paratheatrical, "is inherently limited, circumscribed within a larger domain of human action and experience"[38]. Which are these restrictions? There are two mentioned: of the temporal opening, that gives a delimited duration of the "spectacle", and of the revising ability, where the performer outlives the performance that gives and has the ability to assess and revise it. If these two restrictions do not apply, the "performance" is nothing but a strong metaphor. Thus, Wilshire confirms his initial distinction between the aesthetic and the moral sphere of the human being, stressing that overlooking this distinction attests megalomania and distortion of the human perception. He closes his essay referring to the issue of death: "Even if the persons killed were convicted felons, and the authorities had determined that they were to die, it is not a playful act to kill them as a part of an alleged performance. If I were such a felon, could I regard my own death as a playful event?"[39].

Death performances?

The answer to that question and indeed an affirmative one is given by Marvin Carlson through his essay "Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive". He argues that history is full of cases, where the condemned to death transform their last moments to a kind of performance[40], aiming towards the benefit of their spectators or to a posthumous fame. These people "perform" their death in such a way, like the actor plays his role, before the audience, supplying their "performances" with expressive ways from their familiar cultural tradition or they develop variations of their own in order to achieve the desired result. As much as it may initially surprise us, this counterargument is accompanied by two indicative examples: the public execution of Thomas Crammet in the years of Mary Tudor and the

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[38] Ivi, p. 177.
[39] Ivi, p. 178.
[40] See also R. Schechner, *Performance Studies An Introduction*, Routledge, London & New York 2002, pp. 176-179.

advice Hugh Latimer offers to Nicholas Ridley as they stand over their common funeral fire. Carlson notes that in both cases, the "protagonists" were aware of the representative element in their execution ceremony and that they used it to impress their audience and somehow influence somehow future events. He also adds that these death performances may be considered as "playful" act, if the "game" is considered to be within the framework of an action with extremely serious consequences[41].

We could reinforce Carlson's sampling by mentioning two more known examples: those of Augustus Caesar and Nero. They both considered themselves as artists where, at the time of death, they leave the stage. The first one asked his friends if "the mime of life (the mimus vitae) had played his role well through the end" and asked them to applaud in case they liked the play, while the latter was wondering: "what kind of artist will be lost with me?"[42]. However, could we add many more examples? Is it possible for death to be considered beyond the limits of a bold metaphor, as the ultimate theatrical gesture of a person, who is aware that the gaze of the others is fixed upon him during his last moments? The Cynic and the Stoic philosophers, as the neoplatonists, have left quite solid foundations, even in the 16th and 17th century, regarding the theatrical metaphor of life as a play, that is completed with the third act – and it is precisely this third act that requires great attention during its execution: *memento mori*![43]

However all these do not escape from the limits of a metaphor and most importantly, they can only be established by the standpoint of a systematic observer of the phenomenon of life and not by the standpoint of the dying subject, as Wilshire has already stated. We cannot have the conscience that the dying subject has, while we are still alive. The only thing we can do is to observe this horrible procedure of departure, but we cannot directly experience it as a departure of our own. On the other hand, an actor on stage can give such a performance, by representing a character's death,

[41] M. Carlson, "Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive", *Theatre Research International*, 20, 2, 1995, pp. 90-96 (95).

[42] In J-C. Moretti, *Théâtre et société dans la Grèce antique*, Patakis, Athens 2004, p. 242.

[43] About this issue see L. G. Christian, *Theatrum mundi. The history of an idea*, Garland Publishing, New York & London 1987.

because he places it in the temporal horizon of his own life. But the dying "actor" of the social stage does not have this horizon and furthermore he is not before spectators who can participate in the event as if it was a theatrical event, since in a situation of real death the performance is engulfed in the dark pain of death. Certainly, both examples evoked by Carlson presuppose a transcendental audience that can face death as such and this kind of audience adds up to divine presence. In fact, the spectators of both examples see certain people dying and not some "actors" playing their own death. Only God can see it, because only He can offer the temporal horizon of life after death, where the "actor" is called to integrate the performance of his death, to self-evaluate his performance aesthetically or otherwise, but also to be assessed by the utmost spectator. In this dimension, Carlson's argument finds a certain support, but as Wilshire aptly says, the inverted commas in the words "actor" and "performance" "weigh so heavily on the words that they settle into a domain different from that of theatre"[44].

We should differentiate Wilshire's intentions regarding the demarcation of the theatrical metaphor, from this vertical distinction between moral philosophy and theatrology, moral and artistic thinking or social reality and theatrical narration. The American philosopher does not radically oppose moral will to fiction, he does not intend to enclose theatrical activity within a stationary structure or a still form. Nowhere in his texts can a hint be found about the restriction of the social scope of the theatre, as Carlson accuses him[45]. On the contrary: because he is aware of the great influence he can exercise on social life, he tries to set certain theoretical limits between the two worlds.

As a consequence, the standpoints of the two scholars are not as irreconcilable as they initially seem. Here we should focus our attention on two points.

Firstly, many of the viewpoints Wilshire formulates are, according to Carlson's viewpoint, intelligent and stimulating, that is the reason why he

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[44] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity,* cit., p. 273.
[45] M. Carlson, "Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive", cit., p. 95.

does not entirely disagree with him. He himself accepts, in another essay, as a particular characteristic of the "theatrical" performance the performers's and audience's conscience that interpret social life and civilization, explore the self and the other, the experienced world and the alternative capabilities of its comprehension[46]. This point of view agrees with Wilshire's, according to which, because "a human existence is not a substance, and it holds an indefinitely large fund of unobjectifiability, creativity, and freedom", the truths that theatre offers us disturb the obviousnesses of the world and give rise to more questions than answers. These questions induce incertitude, as well as an effort of interpretation of human life and the world. And this effort is possible because, as Wilshire writes, referring indirectly to the Platonic Cave, "each insight we achieve in the luminous focus of art casts a penumbra of uncertainty"[47].

A second point with which Carlson would gladly agree with is the indefinability of the limits of theatrical art and hence the coherent fluidity of the epistemological criteria by means of which the definition of the limits is attempted. However, this indefinability renders theatricality a particularly creative factor of aesthetic pleasure and, in general, of the social actions, or, as Carlson would state it: "a positive, indeed celebrative expression of human potential"[48]. In addition, he himself, considers the strict definition of scientific territories and the protection of the supposed purity of the cognitive fields a waste of time and a fruitless effort. On the contrary, he focuses on the permeable limits that offer new occasions for research, on the clever and sensitive exploitation of material and methods coming from adjacent fields, as well as from relevant artistic and non artistic expressions, and on the adoption of more pragmatic concerns, that do not require delimitations of a universal range, but can allow alternative and case-based approaches. This kind of goal setting distances us from questions such as: "what are the methods and subject matter of theatre history?" and encourages quests such as: "what research strategies are

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[46] M. Carlson, *Performance. A Critical Introduction*, cit. p. 196.
[47] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity,* cit., pp. 254-255.
[48] M. Carlson, "The Resistance to Theatricality", *SubStance,* 31, 2/3, 2002, pp. 238-250 (p. 249).

available to me from whatever field that will allow me to ask the most productive questions about the historiography project that I am currently pursuing?".[49] Wilshire on the other hand, recognizes that we can not focus on theatre through a super epistemological point of view in order to ascertain its limitations. Each mode of scientific activity concerning theatre must be open to supplementation and correction from any other mode, since each selected point of view conceals more elements than it can disclose and there is no total perspective that overlaps all partial points of view. Hence, every truth revealed by theatre art "can be revealed only through an immeasurable upsurge of human transcendence, creativity, community, and freedom"[50].

[49] M. Carlson, "Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive", cit., p. 96.
[50] B. Wilshire, *Role playing and identity,* cit., p. 256.