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Cover Page Footnote

Ali Mansouri is a theatre director, instructor, and playwright from Tehran, Iran. Currently pursuing his PhD in Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison, Ali has already published some plays and translated several books on theatre in Persian. He has also conducted Theatre of the Oppressed workshops for students and teachers in Tehran, demonstrating his commitment to transformative education through theatre.



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The Mechanism of Empathy in Forum Theater

Ali Mansouri¹

Even though the concept of “Empathy” was mentioned in the earliest texts about performance, there has always been a dispute among theatre theorists in different eras regarding its impact on the audience. Although some have considered empathy as the basis of the theatre, others viewed it as a dangerous ground that can result in inappropriate and unhealthy feelings in the audience. Recent findings of neuroscientists have revealed that empathy (with both real people and fictional characters) is inevitable for human beings, and its unconscious mechanism exists in every mentally healthy person. I believe that this inherent ability can allow us to contribute to making practical changes in the attitudes and behaviors of theatre audiences by utilizing their empathy. As pointed out in this essay, Forum Theatre, as a technique of the Theatre of the Oppressed, is more based than anything on the empathy of its spectators (or so-called Spect-actors by Boal). More than any other theatrical form, it provides a chance for its audiences to identify with theatre subjects, which in turn, through repetition and practice, contributes to the emergence of neural patterns, thereby improving the audience’s reactions in similar situations in everyday life.

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“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Introduction

Controversies about the impacts of theatre on audiences date back to the birth of theatre itself, and it is not incorrect to claim that since people have written about theatre, they have noticed and indicated its transformative power on the audience. It is precisely this characteristic of theatre that persuaded Plato that mimetic poetry is dangerous. In his *Republic* (601a-603e), Plato attacks the naivety of the optimist audience who, without searching for accuracy, accepts whatever a poet writes and an actor performs as truth.

Unlike his teacher, Aristotle considers tragedy a purifying tool for the audience and speaks about the cathartic power of tragic theatre. We can consider him the first theatre theorist who picked up on empathy in theatre as the identification of spectators with fictional characters long before the term was coined. Aristotle introduces two essential concepts concerning the impact of tragedy on the audience: pity and fear, which come under the umbrella concept of sympathy. In *Rhetoric* (1385b), he states that a spectator naturally feels compassion for a suffering person since she imagines herself or someone close to her could be affected by the same unpleasantness. Since Aristotle assumes human beings as creatures with the power of imagination, he believes that an observer can imagine herself in the troublesome conditions of a suffering person and tremble from this imagination. What happens in a tragedy is a form of observing others' suffering. The spectator observes a protagonist on stage who proceeds step by step from ignorance to knowledge and suffers by understanding that she has decided her unfortunate destiny. In Aristotle's view, it is precisely this moment that, through pity and fear, the spectator empathizes with the protagonist.

In *Poetics*, by prioritizing the plot, Aristotle proposes that the audience should be so involved that she feels she is witnessing an actual event. For him, a good plot should possess certain qualities in form and content to arouse audiences' sympathy. In Aristotle's view, if the audience's sympathy with the protagonist is not the main object of tragedy, it indeed is one of its most fundamental qualities.

About two thousand years later, Rousseau raised a moral objection to this quality and stated that "in giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves, whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 269). It is not surprising that a pragmatic philosopher like Rousseau cannot see any didactic-moral benefits in sympathy for the fictional characters of a play. Therefore, in total harmony with Plato, he opposed establishing a theatre in his hometown. However, in contrast with this view, some theorists like Feagin argue that theatre can aid us in testing our moral responses to the world (including empathy with others) (Feagin, 1983). However, in conventional theatre, where the audience is only the spectator of characters' (unreal) actions, the argument could be raised that if a test does not oblige us to act, it cannot be considered a test in the first place. This view can also be found in Brecht's objection to Aristotelian drama and the concept of empathy.

One fundamental question rises above all others: how is empathy distinguished from sympathy? In Aristotle's view, according to Paul Taylor, just as the experience of observing others' suffering can naturally result in the observer's pity, imagining herself in the sufferer's condition could equally trigger her fear (Taylor, 2008). That sympathy would simultaneously stimulate pity and fear in us signifies that we appeal to the concept with two different meanings: first as compassion for others resulting in our pity, and second as empathy, through which we imagine ourselves in the unpleasant situation of others, which brings forth our fear. In other words, when watching a tragedy, we, as spectators, become familiar with the protagonist's fears by placing ourselves in her miserable condition and identifying with her, and, as a result of this

familiarity, our compassion is aroused. Therefore, empathy and compassion are necessary conditions for the occurrence of sympathy.

Since the beginning of the last century, theatre theorists frequently discuss the significance of empathy in actors' work. In recent years, discoveries in neuroscience have elevated the importance of understanding this mental mechanism for theatre practitioners. Although in most of the current texts, the focus has been chiefly on applying these findings to actors' craft and their identification with characters, we can also rely on them to shed a different light on the internal process that happens in the audience while watching a work of theatre.

The concept of the audience as an essential aspect of the theatre was revised in the 20th century. During the last century, following the efforts of practitioners like Brecht, who tried to impel spectators to social activism and considered theatre a means of political change, the distance between the performers and the audience was gradually diminished until the innovation of persons like Boal eliminated it. The spectator became an active participant in the performance or, as Boal put it, a "spect-actor." I will now present a short history of "empathy" in human and cognitive science, review the contradictory opinions about utilizing this intrinsic mechanism in theatre. I will then analyze this concept of empathy in Forum Theatre, in light of recent findings of scientists in the realm of cognitive neuroscience, and conclude with empathy's possible impact on the cognitive patterns of the audience in Forum Theatre.

A Preview of Empathy

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume writes: "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (Hume, 2012, p. 365). He further explains that, in facing other people, humans can resonate with and recreate that person's thoughts and emotions on different dimensions of cognitive complexity and thus achieve an understanding (Stueber, 2019). Despite a long history of philosophical indications of this human capacity,

until the first decade of the 20th century there was no specific term in English, and writers have used the more general term “sympathy” to address this phenomenon.

In the 19th century, German romanticists used the term *Einfühlung* which means “feeling into,” to describe the ability to percept an artwork. The idea was that “by feeling into a painted or verbally described landscape, it is supposedly possible to understand what it would be like to be in that landscape and thus to understand its particular emotional tune or atmosphere” (Ganczarek et al., 2018, 141). Robert Vischer, the German philosopher, who wrote his academic thesis on emotional projection in the 1870s, contended that all humans can feel themselves inside those inanimate objects by attributing their spirit and moods to artworks. One century later, in clarifying this notion, Woodruff writes: “Looking at a dark landscape, you ‘feel into’ it the melancholy you would feel if you were a mountain on such a dark and stormy day, and you say the landscape is brooding and melancholy. However, neither the mountain nor the painting of it is either of those things. Mountains do not brood” (Woodruff, 2008: 166).

Theodor Lipps, the German philosopher, took empathy/*Einfühlung* out of the aesthetics and literature context and made it a fundamental meaning in social and human sciences. As Stueber remarks: “[...] for Lipps, our empathic encounter with external objects trigger inner “processes” that give rise to experiences similar to ones that I have when I engage in various activities involving the movement of my body. Since my attention is perceptually focused on the external object, I experience them—or I automatically project my experiences—as being in the object” (Stueber: 2019). Lipps continues so far as to connect our aesthetic perception to our perception of another embodied person. Empathy in his view is a sort of “inner imitation” through which we mirror another person’s activities or experiences in our mind by observing her physical activities or facial expressions (Lipps: 1903).

Therefore, the foundation of empathy is based on the inner tendency to what Stueber calls motor mimicry. Even though this tendency is not always expressed bodily, Lipps suggests that “it is always present as an inner tendency giving rise to similar kinesthetic sensations in the observer as felt by the observed

target” (Stueber: 2019). Although Lipps claimed that empathy/Einfühlung acts as an effective tool for understanding and reaching the minds of others, he could not provide a compelling reason for this question of how we can tap into others’ emotions and thoughts merely through having access only to our minds. However, almost a century later, the findings in neuroscience show that he was not wrong.

In 1909, Edward Titchener, a British psychologist who was familiar with the works of Lipps, coined the term “empathy” by applying the Greek word “εμπάθεια,” which is a combination of two other Greek words, namely *em* (inside) and *pathos* (feeling). In *Lectures on the experimental psychology of the thought processes*, Titchener wrote that an author’s “choice and arrangements of words” may produce “attitudinal feels,” which consist of visceral pressures, muscular “tenacity,” and altered breathing and facial expressions felt by authors and readers similarly (Stueber: 2019). Titchener calls these reactions “empathy,” and it is evident that he does not limit the concept to mere aesthetic experiences. In Titchener’s view, even the most ordinary and commonplace understandings and perceptions are composed of a similar process, and in all of them, we face a sort of “motor empathy.” He writes: “Not only do I see such abstract concepts as gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness [...] I feel or act them in the mind’s muscles” (Greiner, 2020).

In 1986, Robert Gordon’s “Folk psychology as mental simulation” and Jane Heal’s “Replication and functionalism” became the pioneering points of a different form of studying empathy known as “Simulation Theory”. Gordon proclaimed that “we simulate the mental states of others in order to understand their behavior, or to predict their decision making” (Kemp, 2012, p.140). Once again, this idea raised the fact that, as an inner imitation, empathy can provide an epistemological tool for understanding the minds of others. Hence, according to simulation theorists, we possess a capacity for mental simulation. In a semi-Aristotelian statement, Currie and Ravenscroft shed more light on this ability: “Imagination enables us to project ourselves into another situation and to see, or think about, the world from another perspective. These situations and perspectives [...] might be those of another actual person, [or] the perspective we would have on things if we

believed something we actually do not believe, [or] that of a fictional character. [...] Imagination recreates the mental states of others” (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002, p. 1).

If simulation theory provided a philosophical pattern for observing empathy, the discovery of mirror neurons by neuroscientists provided a scientific basis for how we can understand the inner states of others and see the world from their eyes. The mirror neurons fire in our brains’ premotor cortex when we act and observe every action done by others. In a paper published in 2004, Vittorio Gallese, with a team of neuroscientists who had initially discovered this mechanism in primates, provided some evidence about the existence of mirror neurons in human brains. They concluded that these neurons are activated in our brains when we face the actions and emotions of others.

Following Gordon, Gallese and his colleagues called this process of replication “simulation”: “the fundamental mechanism allowing us a direct experiential grasp of the mind of others is not conceptual reasoning but a direct simulation of the observed events through the mirror mechanism. The novelty of our approach consists of providing a neurophysiological account of the experiential dimension of both action and emotion understanding for the first time” (Gallese et al., 2004, p. 397). Inferring others’ actions and emotions through data collecting and reasoning is one thing; understanding them unconsciously and by mirror neurons is another. The findings of Gallese and his colleagues show that observing others’ actions and emotions is not mentally different from experiencing them.

Given these facts, we can assert that empathy is a mental mechanism allowing us to reproduce others’ actions and emotions in our minds and identify with them, regardless of whether they are real people or fictional characters of a play or a story. Although we can find some traces of Aristotle’s argument about identifying with victims in this assertion, it indisputably has a much broader spectrum than pity and fear, and includes all human emotions. The discovery of mirror neurons shows us that it is entirely natural to experience the same emotions with a protagonist on stage and simultaneously feel happy, sad, angry, or anxious along with her.

However, this is not a brand new statement, and theatre practitioners like Brecht and Boal have indicated that the spectator's empathy with protagonists is evoked in more than just tragedies. As Augusto Boal writes: "Empathy does not take place only with tragic characters: it is enough to see children very excited, watching a 'Western' on television, or the sentimental looks of the public when, on the screen, the hero and the heroine exchanging kisses. It is a case of pure empathy. Empathy makes us feel as if we ourselves are experiencing what is actually happening to others" (Boal, 2008, p. 31). On the other hand, if empathy is so intrinsic and natural, why do some theatre theorists question the identification of spectators with protagonists?

From Criticizing Empathy to the Emergence of Spect-actors

Brecht is undoubtedly one of the greatest critics of empathy in the theatre. Laying out his ideas against Aristotle's poetics, he harshly attacks the centrality of empathy in Aristotelian drama. Although Brecht does not provide a clear analysis of this empathy, by interpreting his writings, we can conclude that in his opinion, when a spectator experiences the same emotions as a fictional character on stage, her empathy is evoked, and, therefore, she is identified with that character. One of the main objections of Brecht to the Aristotelian drama was that, in this type of drama, the conflict of humans with their complex social situation is simplified to personal and emotional disputes, and it presents the agonies of a (noble but unlucky) hero as universal facts (regardless of time and place). If there were no empathizing, it would not be a problem. As Stern pointed out, in Brecht's view, in a conventional production of a play like *Oedipus Rex*, each spectator becomes a little Oedipus and finds herself similarly facing an unchangeable destiny (Stern, 2014, p. 179). Brecht believed that empathy drives spectators to experience the tragedy a hero has experienced and believe that it does not matter how good-natured we are or what ethical and social standards we follow; in any case, an inevitable destiny is expecting us. These thoughts induce some passivity in the audience, contrasting with Brecht's revolutionary approach.

The other problem of empathy for Brecht was that it is an inherent quality in human beings that cannot be controlled and may mislead us in our judgments. David Barnet explains that, in Brecht's view, empathy is a universal and unavoidable human process that does not require us to consider the present differences in the context how the character's context differs from our own; rather, it forces us to experience a worker or an aristocrat's point of view "without understanding why he or she holds it." Brecht believed that empathy is neutral to values and makes us empathize with a saint or a sinner in the same way, and, therefore, it could make us justify an undesirable behavior (Barnet, 2015, pp. 65-66).

In *Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht speaks of utilizing the theatrical qualities of oppressors and describes how Hitler used to make his audiences empathize with him, subtly convincing them that his actions were totally humane and natural, and that given similar conditions, they would respond the same. He appealed to his audience theatrically so that they would confirm him emotionally. As Brecht states, a tyrant like Hitler, who is familiar with rhetorical techniques and mental states, makes his behaviors look normal and natural. Thus, his audience would see themselves as similar to him and conclude that their hero does not have other choices. Therefore, Brecht suggests that "[...] empathy makes it impossible for those who succumb to it to recognize whether the path is dangerous or not. [...] Anyone who empathizes with a person gives up criticism toward him and himself. Instead of being awake, he daydreams. Instead of doing something, he lets things happen to him" (Brecht, p. 310, my translation). This is why Brecht tries to find a way around empathy in his theatre. In one of his articles, he describes his theatre as a technique undertaken by eyewitnesses of a street accident, who use theatre to recount the events for bystanders. In this method, eyewitnesses (performers) explain to bystanders (spectators) what has happened to victims (characters). If the Aristotelian theatre removes the gap between actors and characters through identification and eliminates the distance between spectators and characters through empathy, what we see in Brecht's method is the distinction and separation of these three essential sides of performance from each other. Brecht introduces a collection of techniques as "alienating tools" for removing Aristotelian unity, including direct interaction

between performers and spectators, narration instead of acting, and projections. Alienation is, therefore, an attempt to neutralize passive empathy, and it warns the spectators that the person they are witnessing is not suffering because she is a narrator/actor. Brecht believed that by preventing empathic reactions in spectators, they could find the opportunity to contemplate a protagonist's destiny with a critical stance. Boal clarifies that Brecht does not entirely disapprove of empathy, but he objects to "emotional orgies," and in his view, "good empathy" that is based on understanding (enlightenment) can result in the change he had in mind. Boal explains that Brecht was not against emotions but disapproved of "the emotion which is born out of ignorance" (Boal, 2008, p. 85).

Sharing Brecht's revolutionary and functionalist points of view toward theatre, and introducing them as indicative of a changing world, Boal called blind empathy a "terrible weapon". In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he considers that the worst thing to happen to the spectator is that by immersing herself in the events of the play, she chooses its values and emotions as her own values and emotions. Therefore, empathy leads to the imposition of patterns deriving from an imaginary world to the real world. Boal writes: "*the spectator experiences the fiction and incorporates its elements*. The spectator – a real, living person – accepts life and reality as it is presented to him in the work of art as art" (Boal, 2008, p. 93). This is what Boal called "Aesthetic Osmosis."

If Brecht's solution for preventing spectators' passivity in accepting the values of a play was distancing them from the events on stage and making them contemplate and reach a conscious mental state, Boal goes even further and tries to get spectators to actively participate in the action of the play. By inventing the "spect-actor" who consciously and intentionally inhabits the play's world, he created a new type of performer who observes, physically acts, and intervenes in the play's action. Boal's spect-actor is not in the traditional position of the audience; instead, she participates in the actions and has this opportunity to change the course of the play by relying on her own solutions.

Spect-actor Empathy in Forum Theatre

Specifically, spect-actors in Forum Theatre, a technique of the theatre of the oppressed, are more mentally and physically involved in the action of the play because, in this type of theatre, all of the analysis and arguments occur in theatrical form throughout the performance. In this method, actors perform a scene in which oppression is presented; that is, the play's protagonist experiences some difficulties and cannot achieve her wants due to the actions and behaviors of (an) oppressor(s). Then, the scene is replayed several times to let spect-actors intervene and present their solutions to cope with the unpleasant situation in the play by replacing the protagonist. Each time a spect-actor replaces the protagonist, other actors react in an improvisational way to her interventions. Boal explains: "[Forum is based upon] spect-actors – trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world – against actors – trying to hold them back, to force them to accept the world as it is" (Boal, 1992, p. 20). Clearly, the more the spect-actor participates in this method, the more diverse solutions are offered for solving the represented problems and improving the protagonist's condition. Consequently, the observers have more opportunities to empathize with the protagonist (in different situations).

The point to consider here is that this technique is based on empathy more than any other conventional form of theatre. Here, however, we are dealing with "good empathy" rather than blind and barren emotionalism. The course of Forum Theatre starts with spect-actors empathizing with an oppressed protagonist as mere observers. Since, as a technique of applied theatre, the Forum presents certain subjects for audiences who are involved with them in their everyday life, it is evident that the audience in this type of performance, portraying their own concerns, is more prone to empathy than a theatre about a Greek king who lived 2500 years ago. Here I do not intend to question the value of Aristotelian drama. However, we should consider that the primary goal of Forum Theatre (and any other type of Applied Theatre in general) is

to make a change in the situation, perspective, and life of spectators who are usually not regular theatregoers, and their presence at the performance is related to reasons beyond aesthetics and entertainment. Since Forum Theatre "facilitate[s] community dialogue on social issues" (Miramonti, 2017, p. 10), its audiences are mainly members of a community who have been in similar situations to the protagonist, and therefore, their identification with that familiar situation seems inevitable.

Nevertheless, the spect-actors' empathy does not stop here. After demonstrating the problem, they are invited to intervene as actors and change the protagonist's fate. Although, until now, the spectator had placed herself in the protagonist's situation through an unconscious and mental mechanism, now she is consciously and practically in the protagonist's shoes facing the oppressive scene with her solutions. We should remember that both sides of the portrayed oppression (the oppressor and the oppressed) participate in many of these performances, and their engagement can help us recognize and try to find a solution to these situations through empathy.

In one of my experiences at a school, we performed a situation in which the protagonist was a student whom a classmate bullied. The actions of the play were based on actual events, and the real antagonist (the bully) was among other spect-actors. Following some interventions from other students, during the performance, the boy who was the anonymous inspiration of our play volunteered to participate as the protagonist and presented a solution that was entirely out of his empathy with the subject of his oppression. Such empathic experiences that facilitate change in the real-life conditions of performers and spectators form the basis of the philosophy of Forum Theatre.

It has been said so far that, by repeating a scenario in Forum Theatre, the conditions are provided for spec-actors to try different ways of dealing with an unpleasant situation. Apart from giving the audience multiple opportunities to empathize with the play's protagonist and encouraging them to ponder and come up with different solutions, such repetitions are an excellent exercise for dealing with similar situations that may occur to them in everyday life.

Now the question is: how can this conscious repetition affect the mental mechanism of empathy? In recent years, neuroscientists have conducted several extensive studies investigating the function of mirror neurons and the mechanism of empathy in human beings. In one of the most exciting studies on expert dancers, Beatriz Calvo-Merino and her colleagues used fMRI scans to study the activity of mirror neurons of these dancers while they were observing the everyday actions (movements) that they had already learned and exercised. These scientists used two groups of dancers from the styles of ballet and capoeira (and also a control group with no expertise in dance) to examine their mental simulation of actions while they kept watching those actions done by others. The results of their study indicated that dancers' brains had more neuronal activity when the subjects observed actions with which they were more familiar. Also, the neuronal activity in both groups was more than that of the control group members with no dancing skills. In a paper published in 2005, they concluded, "While all the subjects in our study saw the same actions, the mirror areas of their brains responded quite differently according to whether they could do the actions or not. We conclude that action observation evokes individual and acquired motor representations in the human mirror system" (Calvo-Merino et al., 2005, p. 1248). As Kemp writes: "This suggests that establishing neuronal patterns through training and repetition plays a significant part in the activity of mirror systems in that they are more likely to fire in response to observed action that is already patterned in the observer" (Kemp, 2012, p. 142).

Although the findings of this study only include the neuronal activation of learned motor actions, and we cannot relate it to practical experiences of spect-actors in forum theatre, perhaps we can go so far as to assert that if each emotional or practical experience in everyday life establishes a new neuronal pattern in our brain, which can be activated when we observe them and consequently empathize with others, it may seem right to argue that practicing dealing with every day unpleasant situations in forum theatre can help spect-actors in their daily life experiences by activating neuronal patterns. Hence, after observing different ways of dealing with a crisis in a performance, spect-actors are more prepared for empathic reactions in similar situations that they may face in real life.

Conclusion

The findings of neuroscientists about the mechanism of empathy can help us better fathom and appreciate the function of this mental quality in Forum Theatre. In this form of performance, in addition to identifying with the protagonist through observation, audiences have the opportunity to actually place themselves in her position and actively change the present critical conditions of the play. Additionally, since Forum Theatre is based on repetition and change, audiences can repeatedly empathize with the protagonist in different scenarios presented by each participant. Discoveries about mirror neurons and the function of practice through repetition, and its effect on mental activation of actions, can prove the importance of practicing empathy in Forum Theatre and its impact on spect-actors. Forum Theatre is an arena for practicing empathic activism, and at a time when it seems that we need more empathy to accept other viewpoints and put aside destructive prejudices, this form of performance allows us to take a different and anti-oppressive approach in the face of similar situations in real life.

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