

Rancière and Marcel on the Problem of the Spectator

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Abstract: The human being in the receptive position before a work of art or spectacle of some sort—the “spectator”—is a perennial subject of philosophical concern. The aesthetic and ethical issues surrounding this subject have recently been elucidated by the French theorist, Jacques Rancière, in his essay, “The Emancipated Spectator.” This paper analyzes Rancière’s formulation of the main philosophical problem regarding the spectator, as well as his own tentative solution to it. Rancière’s thought is then brought into dialogue with Gabriel Marcel’s writings on the theater which, I will argue, provide a useful supplement to Rancière’s thought. The upshot will be, I hope, a richer, fuller understanding of the phenomenon of the spectacle, and of the ethical predicament of the spectator.

I. Introduction

The relationship between theater and politics has been a philosophical theme since the beginning of philosophy itself. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre articulates the ancient Greek understanding of theater, politics, and philosophy as follows: “...the categories political, dramatic, philosophical were much more intimately related in the Athenian world than in our own. Politics and philosophy were shaped by dramatic form, the preoccupations of drama were philosophical and political, philosophy had to make its claims in the arena of the political and dramatic.”¹ Thus, the theater may be a site of both truth and deception. The ancient Greeks working out their political problems on stage would make it a site of truth or, at least, of truth-seeking. The theatrical elements of spectacle, imitated emotions, and simulated virtues, on the other hand, imply deception.² The philosopher, tasked with discerning truth from appearance, naturally feels drawn to assess whether the theater is a help or a hindrance in this task. Furthermore, the philosopher’s questions can extend beyond theater itself and touch upon the *spectator* of the theater. To what extent does the spectator have the power within herself to discern between truth and deception in the theater? Does the spectacle always overwhelm the spectator’s faculty of discernment? Can a spectator be active in such a way that she may distinguish a truthful aspect of theater from a deceptive one? The problems here touch upon two fundamental areas of philosophy: the *aesthetics* of theater and the *ethics* of the spectator.

The French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, reflects on the question of the spectator within the contemporary context.³ He does this by inquiring into different theories concerning the

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 138.

² For a detailed account of how Greek theater worked as an aide for political and ethical discernment, see Part I of Martha Nussbaum’s, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³ Concerning Rancière’s concept of the spectator and its relation to politics, see Richard Halpern, who writes: “...for Rancière political disputants are often groups or classes of persons defined precisely by their exclusion from

aesthetics and structure of theater, drawing from such figures as Diderot, Artaud, and Brecht. But he also reflects upon the ways that modern society—defined by the dominance of technology, capital, and media—is shaped like a theatrical spectacle. This shape transforms the modern citizen into a quasi-spectator. Indeed, Rancière believes that to be human *is* (in part) to be a spectator. Understanding the ethics of the modern spectator is Rancière’s way of approaching the problem of citizenship in a modern political society. It follows that any flaws in Rancière’s thinking could be located either in his aesthetic understanding of the theater as such, or in his ethical and political analysis of the “spectacle” of modern society.

In this paper, I will offer a critique of the aesthetic aspect of Rancière’s project, by proposing an alternative to the theoretical understanding of the theater found in his writings. Instead of the theoretical models of Diderot, Artaud, and Brecht, I will propose one based on the writings of Gabriel Marcel. This alternative, I will argue, will deepen Rancière’s own ethics of the spectator. In the first section, I will articulate the problem posed by the “spectator,” as defined by Rancière in his essay, “The Emancipated Spectator.”⁴ Second, I will provide a critical analysis of Rancière’s own tentative resolution to this problem. Finally, I will argue that ideas gathered from Marcel’s writings on the theater, as well as his discussion of mystery, provide a useful supplement to Rancière’s thought. The upshot will be, I hope, a richer, fuller understanding of the phenomenon of the spectacle and of the predicament of the spectator.

II. The Problem of the Spectator

By “spectator,” I mean the human being in the receptive position before a work of art or spectacle of some sort. This position is marked by both receptivity and passivity: the spectator is a consumer of the spectacle before her, which is composed of images. The spectator is in a state of reception of those images. Thus (as stated above), the so-called problem of the spectator can be seen both as a problem in aesthetics and ethics. Its aesthetic dimension lies in the fact that a *spectacle* involves both the faculties of perception and imagination. Its ethical dimension lies in the aforementioned alienation of the *spectator* and in the effort to free her conscience from the grips of the spectacle—that is, to bolster the spectator’s degree of self-awareness and freedom of conscience in the midst of the spectacle.

The situation of the spectator has invited ethical concern since the time of Plato, who places the spectator in the deepest reaches of his Cave, staring at the shadows projected on its walls. The position of the spectator is the position of one who does not—and cannot—achieve a correct perspective with regard to images she receives; she cannot take a truly critical attitude toward what she is receiving. Moreover, if we follow Plato in Book X of the *Republic*, we see that *mimesis* is the lowest form of knowledge—twice removed from the truth. The spectator is fascinated by a mimetic show that does not faithfully depict reality. Another classical source for the problem of the spectator may be found in Augustine’s reflection on tragic pity in Book III of the *Confessions*. Here, Augustine reflects on the strange situation of the spectator: she feels joy or pity for something that isn’t really happening, and takes pleasure in doing so: “...at that time at the theaters I shared

political agency because of their supposed lack of qualification to speak and be heard” (p. 563) in Richard Halpern, “Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 545-572. For more on the links between theater and politics in Rancière’s thought, see Peter Hallward, “Staging Equality: On Rancière’s Theatrocracy,” *New Left Review* 37 Jan/Feb 2006: pp. 109-129.

⁴ See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009) (hereinafter *ES* in the text).

the joy of lovers when they wickedly found delight in each other, even though their actions in the spectacle on the stage were imaginary; when moreover, they lost each other, I shared their sadness by a feeling of compassion. Nevertheless, in both there was a pleasure.”⁵ What disturbs Augustine is not only the fact that imaginary actions (the spectacle) inspire real passions (in the spectator), it is also that the spectacle warps the ethical reasoning of the spectator by not giving her a sense of proportion for the compassion she ought to feel for the sufferings of others. Augustine speaks of “my love for sufferings, but not of a kind that pierced me very deeply; for my longing was not to experience myself miseries such as I saw on stage. I wanted only to hear stories and imaginary legends of sufferings which, as it were, scratched me on the surface.”⁶ Rather than provide proper ethical instruction, the theater teaches the young Augustine to become superficial and sentimental: even though his capacity for ethical reasoning and compassion is engaged, it does not form his character or inspire deep reflection but “scratch[es] me on the surface.”

Augustine’s account of the spectator provides a clarifying contrast with Denis Diderot’s famous idea of the paradox of the actor.⁷ For Diderot, the actor uses his intelligence to imitate feelings. The paradox lies in this surprising juxtaposition between intelligence and feeling. For Augustine, on the other hand, the spectacle causes the spectator’s intelligence to atrophy and makes the spectator feel pity without proper reflection upon the moral fittingness of that pity. Rancière thinks along these lines when he speaks of what he calls (alluding to Diderot) “the paradox of the spectator,” which he claims is “more fundamental” than the paradox of the actor. There is no theater without spectator,” he writes, and yet “being a spectator is [considered to be] a bad thing.” He gives two reasons for this. First, “viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals” (*ES*, p.2). This is very much like the prisoners inside Plato’s cave, who cannot discern appearance from reality. Second, being a spectator “is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive”; thus, “to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.” (*ES*, p.2). Here Rancière’s view dovetails with Augustine’s: the spectacle somehow inhibits, or works against, the spectator’s ability to act ethically.

The ethical task that the paradox of the spectator calls for is that of the liberation of the spectator. “Liberation” in this case would mean helping the spectator to become an ethical actor herself, expressed in either neutralizing the bewitching and addling effects that the spectacle has on the spectator or in somehow repurposing these effects toward some sort of ethical end. This should not be confused with merely making the spectacle into something purely didactic. According to Rancière, “artists do not wish to instruct the spectator. Today, they deny using the stage to dictate a lesson or convey a message. They simply wish to produce a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action” (*ES*, p.14). The question, of course, is how exactly to accomplish this task. Would it mean a new way of making a spectacle or a modification of what it means to be a spectator?

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ See Denis Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

III. Rancière's Emancipated Spectator

Rancière's theory of the "emancipated spectator" rests on the assumption that the liberation of the spectator can only come with a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a spectator and, therefore, of a modification of our normal way of understanding this phenomenon. More than that, we must acknowledge that we are all spectators of some sort. As noted above, Rancière's interest in the problem of the spectator is partially motivated by politics: he sees the spectator as an analog for the citizen and overcoming the captivity of the spectator as a democratic, liberatory practice.

In order to make his case, Rancière first dismantles the two main ways that previous thinkers have attempted to liberate the spectator. The two thinkers Rancière addresses, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, were in fact playwrights with theoretical inclinations, who both believed in the superiority of theater to other forms of spectacle precisely because theater generates a community of spectators who might be liberated.⁸ Rancière questions this assumption—"it is high time we examine this idea that the theater is...a community site" (*ES*, p.16). Unlike the theories of Brecht and Artaud, Rancière's theory is applicable to all sorts of spectacle, even television (*ES*, p.16). But his critique of Brecht and Artaud goes further.

Both thinkers, Rancière writes, take the wrong approach to the problem of the spectator; they believe that "'Good' theater is one that uses its separated reality in order to abolish it" (*ES*, p.7). Brecht's approach represents, for Rancière, an attempt to reach the spectator by alienating her from the spectacle and somehow raising her awareness of social conditions. "Theater [for Brecht] is an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation and discuss their interests," according to Rancière (*ES*, p.6). Brecht thus hopes to critique the spectacle and repurpose it to create a new, living community. The logical alternative to Brecht is Artaud's Theater of Cruelty. Instead of alienating the spectator and encouraging her to reflect on her social reality, Artaud would cancel out the distance between spectator and spectacle, by using theatrical methods which somehow incorporate the spectator into the dramatic action, making her an active rather than passive consumer of the spectacle. Thus, both playwrights attempt to make "good" theater, Brecht by asking the spectator to "refine his gaze," Artaud by asking her to "abdicate the very position of the viewer" (*ES*, p.5). In both cases, Rancière notes, "theater is represented as mediation striving for its own abolition," a sort of "self-vanishing mediation" (*ES*, p.8).

Rancière believes that neither Brechtian theater of alienation nor Artaud's Theater of Cruelty succeed at abolishing their own mediation and, therefore, neither truly liberates the spectator. Instead, both forms reinforce what Rancière calls a "stultifying effect" of theater upon the spectator. To explain what he means, he draws an analogy with the teacher-student relationship, which he developed in a previous work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.⁹ In that work, Rancière explores the story of Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French teacher who in 1818 developed a new pedagogical method based on his experiences trying to teach French in Flanders. The details of the method are too complicated to get into here, but the essence of Jacotot's discovery is that pedagogy can happen even when the teacher cannot communicate with the student; Jacotot himself knew no Flemish and his students knew no French. Jacotot systematized his classroom methods into an

⁸ See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2013), and Brecht's essay collection, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York, Hill and Wang, 1992).

⁹ See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

egalitarian pedagogy that would allow the “ignoramus”—that is, the proletariat—to educate themselves and their children, and thus work toward equality and emancipation.

Rancière follows Jacotot in distinguishing between a “stultifying” and “emancipating” process of education between teacher and student. In the former, the student is overwhelmed by the abyss between the teacher’s wealth of knowledge and her own lack of knowledge. “The first thing [this type of education] teaches [the student] is her own inability. In its activity, it thereby constantly confirms its own presupposition: the inequality of intelligence” (*ES*, p.9). Instead, Rancière supports an “intellectual emancipation” through the pedagogy of an “ignorant schoolmaster”: “He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. What is unknown to him is the inequality of intelligence” (*ES*, p.11). Rancière believes that this model of the emancipating teacher is preferable to the ideas of Brecht and Artaud because it more closely reflects the truth that “artists do not wish to instruct the spectator” (*ES*, p.14). Because it reinforces the student’s own freedom and sense of equality, it is a model that actually accomplishes the abolition of mediation between teacher and student. Most importantly, it does away with what Rancière calls the fallacy of assuming that there is a mechanical cause and effect relationship between what *appears* in the spectacle, on the one hand, and *what should take place within the spectator’s life*, on the other. Rancière contends that Brecht and Artaud commit this fallacy, though perhaps without knowing it. To assume such a fallacy is to imply that a spectator can be manipulated by the right pedagogical method into a state of liberation. But to *manipulate* someone is precisely the opposite of *liberating* them. Instead, a truly liberating spectacle would generate “emancipation as re-appropriation of a relationship to self lost in a process of separation” (*ES*, p.15). This means that the self of the spectator, momentarily beholden to the fascinating spectacle, will overcome this enchantment and return to a deeper awareness of herself and of the world around her. She will then be able to behold the spectacle and be free *at the same time*. What Rancière seems to be saying is that freedom in modern society requires the ability to live alongside the spectacle while still being a free agent and having an open conscience, a state of being he refers to as “self-awareness.”

Rancière argues that this new self-awareness will ultimately reveal that “[b]eing a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity” but rather that “it is our normal situation” (*ES*, p.17). No matter the context, Rancière argues, we are only ever “individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them” (*ES*, p.16). To be a spectator is part of the human condition. The spectator is also a performer of sorts, whose power is “embodied in community,” and once he has been emancipated, participates in the power of “associating and dissociating” the signs received within the spectacle. What this means concretely becomes clear when Rancière recounts his earlier sociological and historical studies concerning the gap between Marxist intellectuals and the French working class. “These workers,” Rancière writes, “who should have supplied me with information on working conditions and forms of class consciousness, provided me with something altogether different: a sense of similarity, a demonstration of equality” (*ES*, p.19). Rancière read lyrical letters written by proletarian workers and discovered that these workers performed the same essential activities as so-called intellectuals. These activities Rancière classifies as seeing, doing, and speaking. The difference between workers and intellectuals was an illusion, and a stultifying one, following Jacotot’s terminology. The difference must be overcome so that the workers do not feel stultified; instead, their work should be respected and does not require extra justification. “That is what the word ‘emancipation’ means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between

individuals and members of a collective body” (*ES*, p.19), Rancière observes. Thus, in order to emancipate the spectator what must be done is neither to alienate the spectator from, nor to incorporate the spectator into, the spectacle (as Brecht and Artaud recommended). Rather, the difference between spectator and spectacle itself must be critiqued. By emphasizing the difference, both Brecht and Artaud produce the stultifying effect. Instead, according to Rancière’s method, by rethinking (if not abolishing completely—Rancière appears to be undecided on his point) her own position and understanding that it is a “normal” part of the human condition, the spectator can gain a new self-awareness that reveals the value of her position and her essential equality with the creators of the spectacle. From this new consciousness of equality, a liberated spectator can think for herself, in more accurate terms, about her condition and the world in which she lives.

IV. Marcel on the Theater

For all of its fruitful insights, the *abstractness* of Rancière’s remarks might leave readers at a loss as to what, *practically* speaking, he is calling for. Given her new awareness of her place in the world and of her equality with every other spectator, what will this “new” spectator *do*? Is Rancière after a new way of making artistic spectacles or is he calling only for more attentive spectators? He concludes his essay wistfully: “I am aware that of all this it might be said: words, yet more words, and nothing but words” (*ES*, p.22). The ambiguity of Rancière’s conclusions leaves us questioning whether or not he has solved his problem. He is correct in rejecting didacticism in art and both the abolition of mediation and the emancipation of the spectator suffice as ethical ideals. However, one may raise the question whether or not he achieves either of these things. To critique the spectator/spectacle relationship is not, in the end, to propose a new way of crafting spectacles or of experiencing them; Rancière’s critique does not in itself propose a new, concrete practice. We can speculate further. Given that, according to Rancière, public, democratic life consists of spectacle, and of spectacle-making, we may wonder what kind of new spectacle the new emancipated spectator will experience or produce for herself? Rancière’s account amounts to a layer of discourse which attempts to rectify an ethical problem, without necessarily penetrating into the mystery of what, in essence, a spectacle *is*. Instead, his philosophy can be read as a moralistic reduction of the problem of the spectator, which aims to resolve the ethical side of the problem (the side of the spectator) without making sense of its aesthetic dimension (that of the structure of the spectacle). One could say that, in the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Rancière has taken the side of philosophy. Thus, he leaves us in *aporia*, one which the writings of Gabriel Marcel—who was both a philosopher and a playwright—might help us to overcome. In particular, two areas in Marcel’s thought may help us beyond this impasse. The first concerns ideas gleaned from Marcel’s writings on theater, including his notion of a “focal point” in the spectator as well as a notion that I refer to as “persuasive imitation.” Marcel’s idiosyncratic use of the term “magic” is another key concept. Second, Marcel’s concept of mystery will provide an alternative model for understanding the spectacle and of the spectator’s place within it.

Marcel’s 1950 text, “The Drama of the Soul in Exile,” provides a succinct statement of the playwright’s approach to theater and, implicitly, his understanding of the spectator’s predicament. Marcel writes plays as “a persistent and coherent effort to place my characters where I could grasp them not only most directly, but also especially from within.”¹⁰ His aim is to depict “immediate

¹⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *3 Plays*, trans. Richard Hayes (New York, Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 15.

human realities from which to leap towards the most distant spiritual horizon.”¹¹ This implies that Marcel hopes to connect the spectators of his plays with the most intimate, inner life (“from within”) of his characters. As he puts it in the same essay: “Tragic pity...springs from a profound understanding, such as a higher being might feel for humanity. And the function of the dramatist...is to lead the spectator to the focal point in himself where his thought can proliferate, not on the abstract level, but on the level of action, and enfold all the characters of a play without any decrease in their reality or in their irreducible individuality.”¹² Thus the spectacle must somehow build a bridge to the “focal point” of the spectator—a term which denotes, it appears, the moral center of the human being, the conscience of the spectator. How could such a bridge be built? Marcel does not offer much technical advice. He argues that “the essence of this magic” of theater does not lie in “the exterior...the extra-human element, in the visual and auditory background.”¹³ Instead, it is the interpreters—the actors—who must supply “an incarnation of thought” and who are the only possible purveyors of “effective magic.”¹⁴ Thus, Marcel leans on a non-rational notion of *persuasive imitation*—of fine acting, of a “magical” performance—when he attempts to explain how a play is able to reach the “focal point” of the spectator.¹⁵

Beyond this notion of “magic,” Marcel does speak about one technical or, better put, structural aspect to playwriting: the final act. He argues that the “the very existence of the work and its effect upon the spectator is determined in and by the last act.”¹⁶ The final act of the play does not necessarily supply an emotionally satisfying, happy ending. It may not resolve all the existential questions that the characters of the play might face. But for Marcel, the final act must reveal something true about the moral condition of the actors; it must unveil an unconscious factor that the characters had never before realized yet which played a vital role in their lives. What Aristotle (in Book VI of the *Poetics*) calls *anagnorisis*, or revelation, is thus a principal part of Marcel’s understanding of theater. But the revelation must also speak to the spectator in a specific way; it must do more than simply reveal a twist in the story or a hitherto unknown plot point. Rather, the revelation that Marcel speaks about must communicate the inner life of the characters to the focal point of the spectator. Thus, while Marcel’s theory of drama, and specifically his understanding of *anagnorisis*, appears to be modern or, at least, not quite classical, it is of a piece with an Aristotelian approach to tragedy in one important way: it holds that the simulated emotions of the actors will connect, on a personal level, with the feelings of the spectators. This “connection” is another way of saying *persuasive imitation*.¹⁷

The fact that Marcel aims to connect with his spectators on such an intimate level means that he would agree with Rancière that overcoming mediation is the highest ideal of theater.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ I have derived the idea of “persuasive imitation” from James Wood’s idea of “mimetic persuasion” in his interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. “The burden is instantly placed not on simple verisimilitude or reference (since Aristotle concedes that an artist may represent something that is physically impossible), but on mimetic persuasion: it is the artist’s task to convince us that this could have happened.” In the case of the theater, the actor is burdened with a similar task of persuasive imitation. See James Wood, *How Fiction Works, Tenth Anniversary Expanded Edition* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 2018), p.241

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See the discussions of pity, fear, and purgation of these emotions in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Books VI, XIV, and XV. The fact that the spectator can feel real pity and real fear through the imitation of tragic action logically implies the presence of some sort of communication between spectacle and spectator.

Moreover, the lives of the characters, for Marcel, are more than just playful fictions; they contain some sort of insight into the moral predicament of the human being. But how does Marcel hope to achieve such artistic goals? How does a spectacle connect with the focal point of the spectator? Answering these questions is crucial to determining whether Marcel's thought has anything to offer Rancière's analysis.

As stated above, Marcel offers few practical clues beyond the idea that the final act of a play must include some sort of revelation. Marcel merely assumes that a good playwright can build such a bridge between the spectacle and the conscience of the spectator. One must assume that he has a certain assumption about the nature of the spectacle itself that allows him to make such a claim. Here, again, Marcel gives us hints. In an interview with Paul Ricoeur, he states: "I think the spectator can draw something positive from the plays, but this positive element remains implicit. The spectator has to make an effort, a kind of work of reflection, which can be suggested but cannot be insisted on."¹⁸ The "effort" that Marcel speaks of here consists of a "work of reflection." This reflection is, by definition, something that must happen after an experience; the spectator, in other words, must reflect upon the play (upon the spectacle), after having experienced it. That reflection may yield the type of spiritual meaning that Marcel hopes to communicate with his plays. But what exactly is Marcel's notion of the essence of theater, that is, of the spectacle? Does it have a stultifying capacity? Does he share the skepticism toward theater evident in the history of philosophy? What accounts for the "magic" that it can exert on the spectator, its persuasive capacity, its ability to connect with the focal point? Another of Marcel's ideas will help us here: *mystery*. This notion supplies a structural account of the spectacle that includes the spectator as an essential component and explains the intimate communication between spectacle and spectator.

One of the enduring aspects of Marcel's thought is his famous distinction between "problem" and "mystery." A problem can be understood through concepts; a mystery can only be contemplated in an act of reflection which, Marcel contends, is distinct from objectifying, conceptual knowledge. Moreover, a mystery is "a problem which encroaches upon its own data," as Marcel puts it in the 1933 essay, "On the Ontological Mystery."¹⁹ One cannot conceive of certain situations as a "problem," but rather as situations in which one is already involved at the level of one's personal experience. One cannot extricate oneself from that particular situation for the sake of stepping back and casting a theoretical, conceptualizing gaze upon it, without thereby mis-representing or distorting the experience. The situation can only be understood from within, through an act of what Marcel calls secondary reflection or recollection.²⁰ Thus, the experience of

¹⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, ed. Brendan Sweetman (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2011), p. 128.

¹⁹ See Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 11. See also page 8: "A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem."

²⁰ See also the 1963 text, "The Ontological Mystery," a chapter in *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963): "...recollection as a re-establishment of contact with the source emits an illumination; this illumination can in no way be confused with the secondary kind of clarity which proceeds from what we have called the understanding" (p. 88). This act of reflection must, of course, be distinguished from Marcel's notion of "primary reflection" which, as Brendan Sweetman puts it, "includes normal, everyday reflection, as well as more complex theoretical thinking, and it involves conceptual generalizations, and the use of abstract thinking"; see Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 47. It is by means of "secondary" reflection that we can illumine the realm of mystery; see Sweetman, pp. 55ff for a full discussion of this tricky notion. H.J. Blackham puts the point this way: Marcel's project involves "using reflection to restore concreteness, the unity of living and thinking"; see H. J. Blackham, *Six Existential Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1952), p. 66.

belonging to a family is, for Marcel, a mystery: a situation that can be reflected upon but can never be adequately understood in terms of concepts.²¹ On the other hand, the composition of water is a sort of problem. It can be adequately summed up in concepts.

The notion of mystery prompts this question: Is a play—a spectacle—more like a problem or a mystery? The involvement of the spectator in the spectacle suggests that the answer is: more like a mystery. The spectacle is a species of a mystery because a spectacle *must* always involve a spectator; a spectacle exists for a spectator, and most spectacles would not take place without an audience present. A spectacle cannot be completely understood as an object, or consumable project, or according to a rubric of concepts. A spectacle too must be experienced and only consequently reflected upon. An act of reflection or recollection on the part of the spectator will generate discourse—it will produce what are formally called *reviews*—but it will never yield an exhaustive account of what the spectacle was “about.” In a similar way, Rancière’s critique of the spectator/spectacle relationship will never amount to more than “words,” as he himself laments. As stated above, in his essay “The Drama of the Soul in Exile,” Marcel employs the word “magic” to describe what the theater accomplishes in the spectator: “But magic and magic alone can lead the spectator to this vital focal point in himself, which is not merely an ideal observation post but a concentration of his whole being.”²² This word, while not precise in a philosophical sense, is nevertheless fitting, because it speaks to the incantatory, enchanting, cultic, divinely inspired, even Dionysian, origins of art, which Plato also speaks of (sometimes critically),²³ and which precede Plato in Greek culture.²⁴ Marcel is on the side of the poets in the ancient quarrel.

If we take Marcel’s approach to theater and set it up alongside Rancière’s theory of the emancipated spectator, we can see one main point of disagreement. Marcel would not be concerned with what Rancière calls the “stultifying” effect of theater. Marcel might embrace the “magic” of theater and rather than speak of a stultifying effect, he would celebrate the enchanting, engrossing experience of theater. This too would be in line with the traditional understanding of theatrical art as being cultic in origin and irrational—or better, extra-rational—in nature. The spectator, as enveloped by the spectacle, is not something that Marcel would fear. Rather, such an envelopment—such a rapture—would be a necessary precursor to the act of reflection that would reveal the moral insights that the spectacle harbors for the spectator.

V. Concluding Remarks

Perhaps the best way to understand the practical importance of Rancière’s concept of the emancipated spectator is to appeal to the Marxist notion of “critique.” Rancière himself often speaks about his own Marxist roots, which he gained during the May 1968 protests in Paris. He believes that the revolutionary spirit of those days is on the wane, however. He writes, “We no longer live in the days when playwrights wanted to explain to their audience the truth of social relations and ways of struggling against capitalist domination. But one does not necessarily lose

²¹ See the essay, “The Mystery of the Family,” in Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 68-97. Here, Marcel again uses the phrase, “encroaches upon its own data,” to describe a mystery—this time, the mystery of the family.

²² Marcel, *3 Plays*, p. 23.

²³ See Plato, *Ion* 534c and *Apology*, 22a-c.

²⁴ See Eugène N. Tigerstedt, “Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato,” *Journal of the History of the Ideas* 1970 (31): 163-78.

one's presuppositions with one's illusions, or the apparatus of means with the horizon of ends" (*ES*, p.11). So what are Rancière's abiding presuppositions and means? At least within the context of the emancipated spectator, we can argue that the abiding presupposition is the idea that philosophy is meant for liberation. The means is an emancipatory *critique*. Terry Eagleton's description of "emancipatory knowledge" is instructive here. Explaining Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach, which speaks about the type of revolutionary thinking involved in his philosophy, Eagleton writes:

This special kind of action-orientated theory is sometimes known as 'emancipatory knowledge,' and has a number of distinctive features. It is the kind of understanding of one's situation that a group of individuals needs in order to change that situation; and it is thus among other things a new *self*-understanding. But to know yourself in a new way is to alter yourself in that very act; so we have here a peculiar form of cognition in which the act of knowing alters what it contemplates. I can never remain quite identical with myself, since the self which is doing the understanding, as well as the self understood, are now different from what they were before.²⁵

Following Eagleton's account, we can make the following interpretation of Rancière's project. By providing a critique of the spectator, Rancière allows the spectator to gain "emancipatory knowledge" that also alters the very experience of being a spectator. He makes it possible for us to become better spectators. Rancière's project is thus ultimately political. Indeed, as he says in an interview suggestively titled "Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence":

...in what is supposed to be an aesthetic book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, I targeted...the discourse on the spectacle and the idea that we are all enclosed in the field of the commodity, the spectator, advertising images and so on. This is because, on the one hand, this discourse generates a kind of anti-democratic discourse and the incapacity of the masses for any political intervention and, on the other hand, it nurtures a discourse on the uselessness of any kind of artistic practice because it says that everything depends on the market...it's necessary to get out of this discourse..."²⁶.

Rancière thus aims to replace a discourse of impotence with a discourse of liberation, a stultifying way of understanding the spectator with an emancipatory way. This discourse is meant to change the spectator first before it changes the spectacle. But the poverty of Rancière's thought remains that it consists of mere "words." More work and more thought are required for Rancière's emancipatory thought to move beyond the realm of mere discourse.

If we appeal to history, we can make another, more trenchant critique of Rancière, one which ultimately leads us to Marcel. It is a simple fact that modern society today contains more than one type of spectacle. To reduce the notion of theater and spectacle to the field of commodities

²⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Marx* (New York, Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-4.

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Politics and Aesthetics* (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 77-78. See also Stork's review of *The Emancipated Spectator*, which underlines the political and ethical (rather than aesthetic or artistic) preoccupations of the book: "Theater is perhaps primary among aesthetic forms in this book because its concern for spectatorship is the most enduring. The material for Rancière's intervention in the reigning critical discourse comes from both the critiques of the 'society of the spectacle' and their cynical reversals, which often treat any claim to political resistance as naïve and doomed to cooptation" (p.157); see Benedict Stork. "Dis-Identifying Spectatorship," *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 79 (Fall 2011), pp. 155-161.

and advertising—to the phantasmagoria of late capitalism—is to miss the deeper, more humane origins of spectacle. The democratic theater of ancient Greece, and the cultic rites from which it sprung, engaged the conscience of the spectators, making them part of a greater, communal whole. The same could be said of the liturgies of all the great religions. A critique of the modern, stultifying spectacle must be coupled with an appreciation of the magic of the ancient one because the modern spectacle is derived from the ancient one and virtuous methods of spectatorship can be derived from ancient practices as well. The work of Gabriel Marcel is suited for this task because it provides a modern understanding of a pre-modern idea: the “magic” of the theater. Marcel’s thought is able to provide a rational account of this magic within an existentialist framework. The magic of theater lies in the fact that it involves a realm of mystery. An emancipated spectator then is one who has embraced this mystery and good things can be born out of this embrace. One could say that the so-called problem of the spectator is itself a mystery.