

THE STUDY OF MIME  
AS A MANIFESTATION OF SOCIABILITY,  
AS PLAY AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Mime expresses a condition suffered by all men: the physical condition. Since here is the seat of all consciousness and the implicit support of the mind's most delicate constructions, mime is the original and universal language. Learning to talk is mimicry at the beginning, and the small child repeats the words before he has understood their meaning. The adult never stops resorting to it; sympathy, love are born and avowed in a mimetic exchange; and relaxation results from the freedom of movement which most games entail. Mime is also a means of social communication; it gives birth to pity, which is awakened by physical sympathy. Pity in turn is the most binding sentiment of all: Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and anthropology consider it fundamental to the condition of society.

*Materia prima* of individual and social life, mime is also the first model of reality, the original stylization. It acts directly on

Translated by Katherine Bougarel.

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

the confusion of what is perceptible—there is no way to express it better. But it delineates a gesture of reality. It occurs among the anarchical impulses of organic life, but it elucidates their behavior. It operates directly on common, undifferentiated physical matter, but it establishes for it an individual conduct. Finally, speaking, singing, dance, music, painting, sculpture, and even architecture first take form in mime. The gesture is the initial artistic creation from which all others are derived, the innate and universal expression.

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Mime usually finds expression in the sociable occasions of everyday life. The sociological concept of sociability has been defined by Georges Gurvitch:<sup>1</sup> “manifestations of sociability point up the spontaneous levels of social life... They constitute non-structured and non-structurable social milieu... they are not limited to a mere nuance of psychical life... they involve virtually all the phases of social life... they involve real collective intuitions of a richness and variety superior to any social group’s structured forms.”

Mime is a manifestation of sociability, however, only in so far as the behavior of the individual expresses an associative purpose. This purpose of adaptation to the group can be observed in particular in the manifestations of fashion, whose mimetic origin is obvious. In language, for instance, the element subject to fashion is not the intellectual import of the discourse, but its mimetic support, that is to say its rhythm, its tonality, its articulation; the choice of words and expressions, in which fashion also plays a part, is not related to thought but to mimicry at the level of mnemonic mechanisms. Fashion, therefore, is a non-verbal means of communication even in speech. Finally, from its mimetic origin fashion draws its animation, its diversity, its direction; what is more, if there exists such a thing as a theory of fashion, it lies in the clarification of its mimetic basis.

The characteristics of fashion are three in number: the first

<sup>1</sup> Georges Gurvitch, *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie*, Paris, P.U.F., 1963, v. I.

one is the conventional character of its manifestations; the second is, paradoxically, the urge apparent in all fashion for a personalized expression; the third is the faculty for metamorphosis, typical of fashions. The mimetic origin accounts for all three characteristics, which up till now the various theories could not reconcile, convincingly enough to connect fashion phenomena with the expression of coherent social behavior.

The conventional character of fashion is fairly easy to see. Its expression is always in mimicry of some behavior. At what point this mimetic origin acts on each manifestation of fashion is more difficult to grasp, but it explains the universal presence of fashion in a cultural milieu.

Social adjustment at first consists in mime: the mime of the child who adapts to his environment. This adaptation is not the result of thoughtful deliberation; it is a purely and entirely spontaneous manifestation of sociability. The individual can never completely dissociate himself from the cultural entity, which he becomes aware of his own existence. Social mime, therefore, is not imposed from outside; the individual seeks and solicits it. The results of L. K. Frank's researches,<sup>2</sup> and Stoetzel's conclusions<sup>3</sup> concerning the "strongly motivated" character of the phenomena of social adaptation or acculturation find in mimetic origin an identical cause. "In this case," Stoetzel remarks, "the subject does not invent anything... he observes, interprets, in order to assimilate and reproduce, using the cultural resources which he already possesses. A very important part of acculturation occurs in this way in everyday experience, without the subject being even aware of it, and more important still, without any explicit pressure exerted on him." Social mime, from which all fashions are derived, is not, therefore, imposed from outside; the individual seeks it *motu proprio*. He finds in himself an active motivation to pursue it, in his desire to adapt to his environment and to master its cultural elements. Every social mime therefore presupposes and designates a group. When the latter does not

<sup>2</sup> L. K. Frank, *Personality in Nature, Society in Nature*, New York, Knopf, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Stoetzel, *La psychologie sociale*, Paris, Flammarion, 1963; *Les phénomènes collectifs de la mode*, pp. 245-249. This contains a bibliography on the subject.

### *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability.*

already exist, it creates it, and fashion is the expression of an accepted social state. Fashions manifest themselves within this state, in its symbols and distinctive marks, and in turn have a refining influence upon them.

Through this refining influence, however, the individual asserts his superiority; he can do so, at least, by means of initiative, emphasis and choice. There is no doubt that the social commitment is obvious: not only are its world of cultural signs recognized and concerned, but it is also essentially the group that will recognize itself in it; it is the group that the subject addresses and from the group that he expects to be recognized, in his person, his role, his status. Yet the individual animates the group with a new motion; the group reflects his personal presence, and he gives its social aims a personal style.

This explains what some fashion experts, such as Flügel,<sup>4</sup> have called the "paradox of fashion," that is, the contradiction between an obvious conformism and the desire to mark one's individuality and to stand out as the influential person in a group. In fact there is no contradiction: concern for a superior adaptation, fashion as much as social mime expresses the individual's desire to assert his worth in the same style of the social group to which he belongs. When he started the "dandy" movement, Barbey d'Aurevilly noted this and stressed the essentially social nature of vanity. Thus the main trend of every fashion most of the time is delineated according to some outstanding behavior which corresponds to the infused ideals of the group concerned: a superior adaptation is always mimed.

As mime of superior social adaptation, fashion has a "peripheral" character which extends beyond useful activity and the mere instinct of self-preservation. Contrary to intellectual purpose, which is defined and limited, it possesses the polyvalency of the gesture that expresses a total experience. Social mime indicates a psychological world which goes beyond the acknowledged structures of social reality by anticipating them. It is an original form of social perception; it offers the experience of a psychosocial field rather similar to that disclosed to psychologists of "form" when they discovered in the simplest form of perception

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes*, London, Hogarth, 1939.

that the object is always determined against the background on which it is outlined. We find an illustration of this in the plays of Pirandello, whose humour dissociates social mime from the awareness which is abstracted from it but is no better for it for want of a psychological "region" in which to prove itself.

Fashion manifestations offer the individual the privilege of expressing his own personality while paradoxically proposing to him only conventional gestures and attitudes which derive from mime. The latter, in fact, because of the susceptible plane on which it operates—a strictly esthetic plane—encourages innovation. The immediate "proximity" to oneself in the mimetic gesture favors original expression. Yet this encouragement to innovate itself reveals a ludic character. It is in fact the spirit of play which accounts for the metamorphoses of fashion which seem so puzzling to the observer. The ludic character is therefore a basic element in the explanation of fashion manifestations; although one could say, truly, that fashion phenomena are defined clearly enough in terms of social manifestations of mimetic origin, since every mimetic expression is play, be it the real state, this appears only through analysis.

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Fashion phenomena are a manifestation of sociability of mimetic origin and ludic character. In what way can the social mime that can be traced in fashion manifestations be considered play? In all its characteristics. If play is "any organized activity which contains its own purpose and does not aim at a useful modification of reality,"<sup>5</sup> then fashion can be defined as such. Its object for one thing is contained in itself, entirely outside any useful purpose, since the object of social mime is spectacular. Whether it is admitted or not, in fact, the aim is always to display to oneself and to others a behavior superiorly adapted to society. Regulated activity, which is one of the basic factors of play, is perceptible in the conventions to which fashion refers, at least implicitly, and which it is, besides, liable to modify. The eccentricities of

<sup>5</sup> Emile Benveniste, "Le jeu comme structure", *Deucalion*, N. 2, Paris 1947.

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

a social "link" link him with the group from which he wants to differ, this difference being manifest through accepted customs. It is obvious, moreover, that the social mime expressed in fashion does not aim at any useful modification of reality; it is characterized rather by an obvious gratuitousness, which is undeniably ludic. When, on the contrary, fashion assumes the aspect of a useful function it tends to become a custom, and even a juridical norm. Fashion manifestations, however, are the freest play of all, because their rules are defined by the most flexible of conventions, the convention that originates in the sense of propriety. We shall now examine the nature of ludic inspiration, of which social mime is the original occasion.

When in contact with nature consciousness, an inexhaustible source of projects, chooses unceasingly between the requirements of utility and the exuberant attractions of life. When the object pursued is the production of elements necessary to self-preservation, a well-defined behavior appears: that of the *homo faber*. Repeated and definite gestures which are known to be useful take the place of the spontaneous and playful gesture; the order of work, of necessity, of specificity, is progressively explored and used. The discovery of tools, the introduction of increasingly more skillful techniques have produced social orders entirely depending on economic circuits, of which our industrial civilization is the last link.

As soon as the object pursued is no longer the production of immediately useful goods, as soon as the gesture is no longer prompted by a reflex of self-preservation, that it is not, in other words, conditioned in any way, there can appear spontaneous expressions, gratuitous forms, which life in its fundamental expansion never fails to propose and which, because of their self-proximity, are marvellously fascinating. It is enough for consciousness to allow the display of such expressions for ludic activities to appear.

Thus the first characteristic of play is not so much the fact that it is a regulated activity, but rather any activity whatever that the consciousness turns into an object of pure entertainment, excluding any useful purpose. The animal plays in that way, thus revealing a still unknown form of consciousness. It is true, however, that conscious consent to play entails the acceptance

of rules, for every activity becomes conscious only through a certain distribution of time and space. Now, the rules of play precisely consist in the free distribution of time and space. The rules of play are therefore the result of imaginary speculations in which creative faculties come into play and artistic virtues are ingenuously heralded.

The aim of the rules of play is then to represent the life which rests within and around all of us as a show displayed to consciousness—to offer to the player encounters, chances, surprises, joys, through which he may experience the abundant gifts of life. Play is a means of putting in parentheses the repetitive activities of working life in order to recover the ingenuousness of the original gesture, the gift of childhood. The innovating function of play in the formation and the course of civilization, as Huizinga<sup>6</sup> has shown, derives therefrom; and above all the joyous excitement which Huizinga considered as an irreducible essence, of irrational character. One can think that the excitement, inherent in play, is due to the wonderful proximity to life which ludic behavior offers consciousness.

The inexhaustible faculty to invent, disperse, change, abolish, restore forms, which can be observed in fashion manifestations are therefore due to their mimetic origin. At the beginning of this essay we have shown in what way mime constitutes the very first form of language. Let us now go further, and, following Gilbert Durand's remarkable theory on the "structures of the imaginary world,"<sup>7</sup> see the connection between the gesture and the "bio-psychological imperatives" of the subject, that is, a background of extremely active impulses. Of course, the gesture does not express these bio-psychological impulses exclusively; it always establishes a "passage way" between those impulses and the "intimations of the environment." This is what Gilbert Durand explicitly calls the "anthropological passage," meaning "the ceaseless exchange which takes place at the level of the imagination between the subjective and assimilating impulses and the intimations of the cosmic and social environment." In

<sup>6</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, Paris, NRF, 1951.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, P.U.F., 1963.

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

other words this passage is a "reciprocal genesis" which reveals the plasticity of imagination by the successive adaptations of the living subject. This passage, which Gilbert Durand discloses at the level of imagination, is based on instinctive mimicry which depends itself on primary reflexes. The indefinitely creative power of the mimetic support is thus verified at the level of scientific observation.

Fashion is best followed during the period of greatest mimetic plasticity. But, whenever the biological plasticity of a person loses its flexibility because of illness, old age, or ill-temper, this same person is no longer subject to the sway of fashion. But it is enough for social mime that the younger generations, in their desire to dominate life in all its forms, should mimic, in successive waves, the behaviors which seem to bring happiness, success and power; it is enough to ensure social mime constant animation, and even turbulence in an age of demographic pressure. It suffices too to give an idea of the demoniacal nature of social mimes of which fashion is the foremost expression.

We shall now examine to what extent the play of fashion can influence social structures, such as customs, traditions, laws, cultural productions, and how these very structures absorb in turn the restlessness of fashions and exorcise their anarchical commands. We shall investigate on one point only, however; namely on the manner in which the plays of social mime are definitively caught in artistic expression.

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The object of play is pleasure. It should be noted however that it is not an organic pleasure, or a pleasure arising from the simple satisfaction of an instinct; and that its principle is to be found in self-awareness. For, in play, consciousness experiences actively its own faculties, and through the free use of them discovers its own freedom. It pursues this discovery, not to study it deeply, but to enjoy its immediate and exhilarating proximity. Such is the pleasure of play.

The freedom of play gives a foretaste of a still more thrilling freedom, and brings the discovery of an ingenuousness nearer still to the feeling of "self-proximity" developed by any conscious



activity. For the more attentive, there arises the possibility of transforming the forms, which act as the support of play, into forms which can express the most intimate personal wish. As soon as the thought of this possible transformation of the liberties of play into autonomous personal expression takes possession of consciousness, as soon as the player, suddenly fascinated, wholly consents to it, play gives place to artistic creation. The transition from play to art is therefore achieved by the progressive awareness that play can be a means of extended personal creation. Art is born from the requirements which this awareness entails.

Thus, the child who is a future artist is more eager at play than his fellow—this was the case with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Goethe, and Chateaubriand. Or else, already fascinated by the possibility of self-expression which he has discerned in previous play, he no longer mixes with other children and remains engrossed with delight in the sketches of his pencil or the images of his dreams—as was the case with Mozart.

The transition from play to art can be observed in folklore, and in particular, in the spectacular games of necessarily mimetic origin which take place at popular festivals. Folklore is naive self-expression at the level of a locally restricted group, whereas art is conscious expression at the level of civilization, that is, in a universal perspective. Any expression worthy of appearing in the festival in which the group celebrates its individuality and joy of life—songs, dances, tales, in short, all the spectacular games for which the festival is the occasion—belong to folklore.

By interrupting for a time the bondage of work,<sup>8</sup> the festival bears a connection with play: it exposes to a whole community the freedom which play provides a single individual. Like play, the festival offers the opportunity of a deep self-expression, revealing, as Heidegger<sup>9</sup> observed, the mystery of life, the sacred.

However, what characterizes the festival at first is the lifting of restraints; the pressures of working life make this relaxation necessary. This explains why in all folklore, crude parody, burlesque grimace, buffoonery prevail and, in the most archaic

<sup>8</sup> Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, Paris, P.U.F., 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Approche d'Hölderlin*, Paris, NRF, 1962.

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

forms to which our carnivals still attest, the boldest gestures of transgression.

The accomplished art of comedy still shows traces of this phenomenon. Carl Kerényi<sup>10</sup> has exposed the origins of Athenian comedy by studying the folklore of the vintage season in Attica. He has demonstrated that the comedy carried on and transfigured the functions and rites of the festival, and in particular, its phallic inspiration.

Another instance is the unfailing appearance of the clown in Elizabethan drama, with his licentiousness, his low and vulgar jokes, his hilarious grimaces, and his complete disregard of the theatrical performance which he so freely interrupted. It took Shakespeare's versatile genius to amalgamate with the plot of the most serious plays the capers of the folkloric clown which the popular audience demanded. It is therefore in the work of the English playwright that the transition from folklore to art can perhaps be most clearly distinguished.

In the *Commedia dell'arte* the ludic origins are obvious: the outline of the plot, folkloric characters such as Pantaleone, Arlecchino and Pulcinella, direct the dramatic play of mime and speech. The object of the *Commedia dell'arte* is besides to offer a pretext to engage in the intoxicating pleasure of gesticulating, dawdling, singing, dancing, grimacing *per gioco*, gratuitously.

Puppet shows, apart from being the oldest and most universal form of theatre, are also the most complex of all the arts derived from folklore. They contain all the features of transgression of the festival, and also, through the articulated puppet, the survivance of fetishist belief in magical powers. They retain, moreover, a childhood legacy in which poesy and cruelty are paradoxically mixed; poetry because the puppet show is a children's game and the adult who indulges in it retraces in its crude but efficient schematism the sensations and feelings of early childhood; cruelty also, because the punishments and acts of revenge practised on the wooden characters can be carried to extreme savageness. There is no doubt that the play of the

<sup>10</sup> Carl Kerényi, "The Birth and Transfiguration of Comedy in Athens," *Diogenes*, N. 38.

articulated puppets gives rise to a release of inhibition, the mechanism of which can be discerned by psycho-drama.

Michel de Ghelderode is probably one of the last western playwrights to have created a theatre directly inspired by the archaic spirit of the puppet theatre and village fair buffoonery. This author started by writing for a travelling theatre company in the Flemish countryside, and he continued to produce drama which incorporated the liberties of popular repertory. Garcia Lorca also tried to revive a sort of travelling theatre, but with a marked difference: what his theatre borrows from folklore it transfigures; it contains none of the failings of popular theatre and, as it develops, his drama always attains the dignity of tragedy. We see further the new meaning that mime acquires in his work. In Ghelderode's plays, on the contrary, mime is almost always comical, and the gesture releases a kind of Dionisian exhilaration.

In France, however, during the seventeenth century, comedy took another direction; the spectacular game mimes the adventures of man as prey to the hazards of social life or the world around him. In Molière's comedies of manners mime is no longer free gesticulation, intoxication with movement, an explosive liberation of the instincts; it is a subtle study of character in human relationships in perfect and full self-possession. This refinement of mime occurs whenever social life rises to a high level of urbanity. It is not mere chance that Menander appeared in Athenian drama at the end of the fourth century, Goldoni in Venice in the eighteenth century, and that Molière's best comedies were written for the audiences of Paris and the court: all belonged to milieu in which freedom of criticism, social activity, and personal artistic accomplishment were practised with the utmost variety and imagination. Being part of a single community did not hinder personal originality, but on the contrary stimulated it. Comedies of manners then appear whose purpose is to provoke laughter at its most elevated level, as Baudelaire defined it, laughter "expressed by the organs of command and intelligence, the eyes and the mouth." Such laughter approves a failure to adapt to the requirements of an exquisitely refined social life. Bergson, who moreover drew most of his examples for a study on the subject of laughter from Molière's plays, provided this

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

conclusive analysis: it is a laughter that reminds everyone of the necessity of self-control. The manner in which Molière interpreted his roles and his type of mimic—with bowlegs, a hunchback, rolling eyes, huge moustaches, vocal inflections from raucous to shrill, hiccups, stuttering, etc.—confirm this: Molière presented as laughing matter a disobedient corporeal mechanism. The awkwardness he shows is intended entirely for a reasoning reason for which lack of self-control is the acme of ridicule.

Such a view did not take sufficiently into account the basic inconsistency of human nature. In Marivaux's plays comedy discloses how feeling can surprise the most subtle reason. In the plays of Beaumarchais the exuberance of a vital instinct prevails, and vaudeville is only a step further. Was this a return to the origins? After Beaumarchais with the excesses of romanticism, instinct is less sure, more forced; finally laughter turns into destructive irony, as can be seen in the plays of the German Romanticists, in Georg Büchner's *Wozzeck* for instance. In this case, comedy leaves the scoffer alone, a prey to a tirelessly questioning attitude. Pirandello has no other themes. Absurdity can arise, and does indeed appear in Ionesco and Beckett where mime reveals the vulnerability of the body and the flesh.

A theatrical form exists which not only embraces all the spectacular games of the popular festival, but also incorporates them within a perfected work of art. This is the case with the Japanese *No*. It contains in fact all the popular forms of expression: buffoonery, farce, forms akin to the *Commedia dell'arte*, grotesque pantomime, but these are integrated into a whole that also unites with the comedy of manners, the most refined poetry, tragic sentiment bordering on the sacred, pure mime. During the nine hours' performance and throughout the five plays which, according to fourteenth century tradition, are dedicated in turn to a story of gods, of samourai, of a woman's destiny, of a madman, to demons and popular festival, with comic interludes, every social state, every level of conscious life are presented. The freedom with which the *No* play moves in time and space and abruptly passes from the real to the imaginary world, from familiar to surrealistic scenes, from tangible reality to dream, from profane to sacred subjects, from ferment to quiet, is due principally to its resort to mime.

For mime provides a charade of basic human reality. It is a pause, a gravitation center, a virgin energy, from which can be derived any new form of creation, any new expression of any kind—whether narrative, poem, song or dance.

In its ultimate form the western drama has lost the certainties of instinct; pure mime restores them and this is one of the reasons for its growing success. From Etienne Decroux, in the heyday of the Vieux-Colombier, to Marcel Marceau, who is well known to the general public, the strict, absolute and rigorous art of mime has increasingly asserted itself.

The aim of pure mime is to reveal the expressive capacities of the human body, which is the source of all experience, of all consciousness, of all intent. This explains the choice very often in modern mime of an expressionless mask, which decidedly opts for the body over the face."<sup>11</sup> To wear an inexpressive mask means to cancel social character and to dispel personality, both of which particularly show in the features of the face. Thanks to this mask, movement is freed from the usual inhibitions and these give way to the most unaccustomed Dionisian impulses. Life offers itself as the gods have made it.

In pure mime, the meaning of tragic mime is rediscovered—the tragic mime of antiquity, which the great interpreters of Racine sometimes attain with the instinct of genius. The function of tragic mime is the same as that of purifying rite. The frenzied gesticulations of the desperate character, his moans, his cries, are as though devised to purge the consciousness of its sensitive soul, to expel the "animal spirits," as Descartes called them. In the process of becoming resigned, the soul discharges its emotive powers in imprecations to the point of complete physical exhaustion. It is a sort of primitive treatment, which could be compared to electro-shock in its neuro-organic logic. By stimulating physical repulsion, nervous horror, imaginary panic to a state of paroxysm, tragic lamentation exhausts their anarchical manifestations and produces the viduage necessary to a state of spiritual awakening. Thus poignant mime—which in ancient

<sup>11</sup> Jean Dorcy, *A la rencontre de la mime*, Les cahiers de la danse et de la culture, Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1958.

## *Mime as Manifestation of Sociability*

drama was the climax of the performance—plays a purifying role, comparable to the sleep of the senses for mystics.

The sublimity of mime consists in the fact that it reveals the “unnamed.” It is rarely sustained for long; it is encountered—in Shakespeare, Racine or Beckett—when such a silence erupts that no word conceals it. We saw previously that mime displays the gift of life in its essence and stands therefore at the origin of all expressive forms—dance, music, singing, poetry, painting. We now see that it can be used to express the renunciation of this very gift of life. Death is neared in dumb mime; the supreme and silent experience of pure mime thus evokes the unnamed.

The unnamed however is close to the mystery of origins, which heralds the sacred. *Prometheus Bound*, the tragedy of a fallen god, achieves this level.

Finally, the meeting with the sacred calls forth a presence. And this presence is religious experience. Liturgy commemorates with holy gestures that are timeless—because they continue it—a presence to which a God has consented. Gesture thus attains its ultimate dignity.