

Bad Faith and the Actor

Onto-Mimetology from a Sartrean Point of View

Tony Fisher

Sartre was extremely fond of drawing on the example of the actor in order to illustrate some of his key philosophical preoccupations. Most controversially, in his early masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, he exploits the actor's 'mechanical gestures' when playing Hamlet to shed light on the attitude of 'mauvaise foi' – acting in bad faith. *Prima facie* this is hardly surprising. It is well known that the actor's is an ambiguous case, ethically speaking. Insofar as his mode of behaviour is to *imitate* behaviour he does not *act* but only appears to do so. Sartre, in 1939, observes: 'an actor imitates joy, sorrow, etc, without *being* joyful or sorrowful, his behaviour is addressed to a fictional world. He imitates behaviour but is not himself behaving'.¹ Now if that were all Sartre had to say on the matter then nothing would particularly distinguish his from a host of similar jejune views on acting. Yet it is soon evident that Sartre has much to say on the subject that is of contemporary interest – and specifically regarding the problem of what exactly it is that the actor is *doing* when they act. My aim in this article is to substantiate this claim by exploiting Sartre in two ways. Firstly, it is to extrapolate from his scattered remarks on the actor an 'existential ontology' of mimetic performance – what I will call (following Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe²) an 'onto-mimetology'. The second aim is to use this reconstruction in order to test the potency of Sartre's analogy of the actor with the situation of bad faith. My contention is that once we have grasped the problem of acting *from a Sartrean perspective*, the analogy is, first, by no means as unambiguous as he assumes

and, second, intriguing for the light it casts on Sartre's existential interpretation of freedom.

Sartre's Contribution to an 'Onto-mimetology'

As I understand it, onto-mimetology involves an analysis of the phenomenon of mimesis in terms of the being for whom mimesis is a fundamental possibility: 'man'. Sartre never uses the term 'mimesis' – he speaks, instead, of the 'Imaginary' – though with the same phenomenon in view. The Imaginary defines for Sartre an 'attitude of consciousness': it makes the imaginary object *present* to consciousness *through* – as Sartre terms it – an 'image function'.³ This function has, as he says elsewhere, an 'irrealising' utility, which allows us to transcend the real by 'nihilating' what *is*, thus opening up the fields of possibility and alterity. Sartre concludes: 'It is the appearance of the imaginary before consciousness that allows us to grasp that the nihilation of the world is its essential condition and its primary structure'⁴ - and: 'There could be no realising consciousness without imaging consciousness, and vice versa. Thus imagination, far from appearing as an accidental characteristic of consciousness, is disclosed as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness'.⁵

It is because the mimetic function is described by Sartre as an *essential and transcendental condition of consciousness* that we can specify the task assigned to an onto-mimetology as describing (a) the ontological conditions for the possibility of specific *modes* of mimetic activity – for instance 'acting' – founded on (b) the more fundamental mode of mimetic comportment that defines human existence in general. In this way a theatrical mimetology gives way to a general mimetology. Allow me to explain by distinguishing the two modes of mimesis that will be of concern to us –

one a ‘derivative’ theatrical mode of mimesis, the other, ‘originary mimesis’, as I shall call it.

In contrast to standard Platonic-Aristotelian derived notions of mimesis – the art of representation or imitation – originary mimesis refers to a praxical *activity*. Mimesis is here a performative act not to be confused with the mimetic object: *a* portrait, *a* characterisation, *an* image, *a* representation. Nor is it to be conflated with a mimetic consciousness in the sense of an explicit second order consciousness *of* the image as image. Originary mimesis describes what it is like to be ‘us’: we are inveterate ‘mimeticians’. Specifically, we represent ourselves to ourselves through the medium of action – or, as Sartre says, through our projects. It is only by acting in the world that we arrive at an understanding of who we are. This does not mean that Sartre thinks we possess an explicit consciousness of this activity. Quite the reverse, such a consciousness is inchoative and reflexive. It is the Imaginary as embodied *in* our practical behaviour; meaning for Sartre: our self-conceptions are not fixed *actualities* but rather ways of projecting ourselves *as possibilities*. This is exemplified by the way we press into certain *ways of being* that make sense *to* us and make sense *of us as* situated beings. Sartre does not say that we are only our possibilities, since these practiced ways of being through which we are realised as embodied agents are grounded in what he calls our ‘facticity’, which connects us to the world and with the past.

More disconcertingly: originary mimesis reveals that an ineliminable contingency belongs to the self. After all, if general mimesis describes a basic comportment belonging to a being whose aim is to exist according to some determinate self-conception – to see oneself *as* a teacher, a family man, an artist, a revolutionary, or whatever – then to the extent that we realise ourselves only in the

manner of something tacitly *aimed at*, we must also acknowledge that *in being it* we are *not it*. ‘I am the self which I will be’, says Sartre, ‘in the mode of not being it’.⁶ Originary mimesis thus describes the self as a comportmental activity that is always thrust beyond itself. It describes human existence in terms of *self-transcendence* – or as Sartre otherwise expresses it, in terms of ‘freedom’. Freedom is my power to ‘nihilate’ what I *have been* for the sake of realising what I *will be*.

Now it is by pursuing this Sartrean line of enquiry into originary mimesis that we can begin to see how mimesis more narrowly construed as theatrical mimesis might be understood as a derivative and founded phenomenon. If this ‘derivation’ is best exemplified through an analysis of theatrical mimesis, and specifically through the ontology of the actor, it is because, in contrast to the other arts, theatrical mimesis incorporates into its very existence the imaging attitude Sartre describes. Let us consider the evidence for this by venturing the following idea: the play *is* not the representation of an action, performed by the actors. It *is* only in the particular en-acting by the actor of a representative function of the text. It *is* action itself; and it *is* just what the actor *does*. The actor embodies this mimetic function in his ‘playing’, ‘acting’ and ‘doing’, not by stepping into the shoes of a ready-made character, but in the ‘gestic’ mode of an ‘actant’. I use this term loosely borrowed from Greimas (it is certainly not Sartrean) to distinguish on the one hand the person of the actor from the role, the fictional *character*; and, on the other, to avoid speaking of the actor’s *role* in terms of *portraying* that ‘character’. By actant, I mean a form of understanding which *fuses* the actor and role into a new facticity. In the case of the actor who plays Hamlet it is through the ‘Hamlet-actant’ which becomes a *way of being* for the actor that Hamlet himself is *realised* and the actor, in Sartre’s words, *irrealised* (*irréalisée*). What makes this mimetic substitution possible, according to Sartre, depends on the

ability of the actor to use his own body, experience and sensibility as an *analogon* for the sake of manifesting a phantasm.

To grasp what this means, consider Sartre's interpretation of the well-observed puzzle of the actor, and in particular, his engagement with Diderot's treatise on acting – *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. Diderot expresses the paradox of the actor when he observes: 'Great poets, great actors, and, I may add, all great copyists of Nature, in whatever art, beings gifted with fine imagination, with broad judgement, with exquisite tact, with a sure touch of taste, are the least sensitive of all creatures'.⁷ The paradox is this: in order to move us, the actor must be unmoved. Diderot reflects: 'All these emotions he has given you. The actor is tired, you are unhappy; he has had exertion without feeling, you feeling without exertion'.⁸ And he goes on to add: 'Were it otherwise the player's lot would be the most wretched on earth: but he is not the person he represents; he plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person; the deception is all on your side; he knows well enough that he is not the person'.⁹

Sartre agrees with Diderot, of course – when we attend a performance of Hamlet what we expect to see is not the actor's anguish but that of the Prince of Denmark. Remarking on the great Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean, Sartre writes '[he] draws his pride in the fact that he would not be admired for "being" the character so well unless everyone, starting precisely with himself, knew that he was not'.¹⁰ Sartre also says, however – and this would seem to be a departure from Diderot's view – 'No one can act a play without permitting himself to be totally and publicly devoured by the imaginary'.¹¹ For the actor there is no evading the paradox; his whole being is implicated in it. Moreover, in contrast to Diderot, for whom the actor is seen to require judgement over emotion, for Sartre, the great actor is not and

cannot be the man without sentiment. But nor is the actor's emotion the *same* as his character's. Rather, he uses his 'sentiment' as an *analogon*.

Diderot is right that the actor does not really experience his character's feelings; but it would be wrong to suppose that he is expressing them quite coldly, for the truth is that he experiences them unreally (*irr ellment*). Let us concede that his real personal feelings, such as stage fright (...) serve him as an analogon and through them he aims at the passions that he has to express.¹²

To appreciate the full implications of this statement we need to understand how the *analogon*, as a structure, stands at the very centre of representation. Consider first a straightforward example, a statue of Venus. Sculpted in marble, Venus represents an 'imaginary woman' who, as Sartre says, 'is not and never has been'.¹³ Nevertheless, we *see* Venus in the marble and at the expense of what is merely 'real': the marble is no longer there as a hunk of stone. Shaped and crafted by the sculptor it functions as an *analogon* of Venus. In Sartre's view, the being of the marble is 'subsumed' under the mimetic function as a representative for the *non-being* of Venus.¹⁴ The *analogon* in this way acts as a material intermediary for an intentional act that seeks to materialise a non-existent object through it. Hence *analogons* 'serve as *representatives* of the absent object, without managing however to suspend that characteristic of the objects of an imaging consciousness: absence'.¹⁵ The *analogon* can never make what it represents 'real', and yet it *gives* the absent object in the manner of a perceptible thing.

Analogons are also infused with a social or intersubjective character, as Sartre again explains: the 'inert being of the stone exists for the purpose of derealizing itself

publicly by derealizing its beholders'.¹⁶ The stone statue is said to be *of Venus* only because it draws those who contemplate it into the symbolic space of the irreal opened by the power of the Imaginary. Correlatively, this tells us that the *analogon* derives its representative power from a cultural space that invests it with meaning.

How does this analysis of the *analogon* bear on our understanding of the actor and the structure of theatrical mimesis in general? Let us first consider the claim that the actor can only become an *analogon* of Hamlet because the theatrical spectacle induces a 'collective unrealisation'.¹⁷ The significance of which is surely this: the audience is also thoroughly implicated in the paradox of the actor, since the achievement of the actor's self-derealisation is gained at the expense of the unrealisation of the audience. The great actor, for instance, excites us to entertain a kind of 'quasi belief' – or as Sartre says a belief that is already 'neutralised'. A neutralised belief might be thought of as a species of false belief which, despite our consciousness of its falsity, is one we are nonetheless willing to tolerate for the sake of sustaining the fiction. It permits us to believe the following for example: that Hamlet intends to seek revenge for his father's murder, that he devises a cunning plan to expose Claudius and that he accidentally kills Polonius. Still, we never believe that there *was* a murder, and still less that the actor is licensed to wreak actual bloody revenge in Hamlet's name. The actor cannot convince us that the spectacle is real. On the contrary, 'mimetic' belief is generated as an effect of the Imaginary and incorporates within it only one certainty: that it is not true. 'Kean is not Hamlet', Sartre tells us, 'and he knows it and knows that we know it' – and he goes on to add: 'The only means [Kean] has to ensure that the play shall exist *through us* is to infect us with it'.¹⁸ But then we might well ask: *how* exactly does this supposedly infectious

power of a Kean or a Brando neutralise our *disbelief* and so captivate us in his fiction, even as we *know* it to be false?

Unfortunately, Sartre's position falls short of providing a full answer to this question. Still, he gives us a clue as to how to proceed and indeed we already have in our possession a preliminary answer thanks to him: 'It is not that the character is realised in the actor, but that the actor is unrealised in the character'.¹⁹ In short, it is through the mimetic power of substitution. Just as the marble in the case of the statue of Venus substitutes its own being for the sake of presenting a non-existent goddess, so the actor presents himself as the *analogon* of a non-existent man – Hamlet. Sartre's answer, then: the actor substitutes himself *for* Hamlet. For sure, in the case of the actor things are complicated by the fact that the actor is no hunk of inorganic stuff. Even so, Sartre insists: 'he resembles the statue in that he is a permanent center, real and recognized, of unrealisation (...). He musters and commits his whole self to make his real person the *analogon* of something imaginary'.²⁰ The difference is, unlike the statue of Venus, the actor is both sculptor and sculpted; hence 'his material is his person and his aim is to be some other person in unreality'.²¹

Here we can better appreciate the nature of Sartre's disagreement with Diderot. To say the actor's emotions become 'irreal', as Sartre does, is not to say that they are thereby entirely absent. In order for the actor to manufacture the anguish of Hamlet he needs to find a means of achieving this effect. Where, asks Sartre, is this material to be found other than in the actor's own facticity? The actor's skill does not lie in duping the audience but in transposing his experience into the new facticity which he is to embody. This cannot mean, *pace* Diderot, that for the actor there are no emotions present on stage; that his playing is without feeling. On the contrary, for

Sartre – in direct opposition to Diderot – the actor’s real sensibility is not to be suppressed but harnessed for the presentification of what is unreal.

[It] is evident that the actor does not posit that he is Hamlet. But this does not signify that he is not entirely mobilized to produce Hamlet. He uses all his feelings, all this strength, all this gestures as analogons of the feelings and conduct of Hamlet. But by this very fact he unrealizes them. *He lives entirely in an unreal world.* And it matters little that he *really* cries in playing the role. These tears (...) he grasps them himself – and the public with him – as the tears of Hamlet, which is to say as analogons of unreal tears.²²

Thus whatever feeling is actually experienced provides the *matter* by which the actor concretely *embodies* the fiction. The actor as *analogon* thereby presents himself as a material correlate for a fictional actor who would otherwise remain an inert fiction. What makes the *analogon* possible is precisely the unrealising power of the Imaginary to dissolve and reconfigure the real. Applied to our specific case: it is the power possessed by the actor to transform himself into actant; a power that presses his real being into the service of an unreal, fictitious and in effect non-existent Other.

Accordingly, if it is true, as Sartre says, that the actor will ‘never convince us’ of the reality of the events on stage, he nevertheless needs all his powers of persuasion to induce us to enter the unreal. The effect is peculiar: I *see* Hamlet, but I do not believe him to be really there in the flesh. And so my belief is almost certainly neutralised: it is not true belief; I do not posit Hamlet’s existence. But that is not all for it turns out that the actor never was trying to convince me of the *reality* of Hamlet in the first place – this, after all, is surely the self-evident compact the theatre makes

with its audience. What the actor requires in order to effect the transposition from real to unreal is simply that I believe *in his acting*; and thus, that I *must* believe in *what* he does. Hence, when the actor steps onto the stage, immediately I take up an attitude in his favour: *I want to be convinced*. Conversely, the actor's job is to *satisfy* this demand: he does all he can to convince me of his grasp of the part by demonstrating his command of the imagined situation. In this sense we might think of the actor as a kind of 'truth-teller' whose job is not simply to *display* the fiction but to *justify* it. He performs this function in two interconnected ways. Firstly, he mobilises his entire being so as to constitute himself as the embodiment of an 'empty' proposition – a 'what if'. Secondly, in that unreal mode, he strives to 'defend' that proposition *through* his performance, and through the technique of presenting himself as an *analogon*. Believing in his acting – his 'as if' – I then believe in the fiction; the power of the second is founded on the potency of the first.

But what implication does this have on our understanding of the paradox? Is it in this way, and as Sartre suggests at one point, 'resolved'?²³ Here we must disagree with Sartre. For the power that enchants me, that solicits my whole being to succumb to a state of rapturous attention – a power, moreover, that loosens the weak grip of mere doxic comportment – fundamentally draws its strength from the paradox. Hence my belief 'in what the actor is doing' is directed neither to the fictional figure of Hamlet, in whose existence I cannot believe; nor is it directed to the person of the actor playing him, in which case belief would remain on the side of the mundane and so captive to the real. Instead, it goes out to and seizes upon the Hamlet-actant – the actor as *analogon*, insofar as the Imaginary – the power of consciousness to 'derealise' itself – allows me to believe in his substitution. Equally, as every actor must know, failure belongs to theatrical mimesis as an inverse law of the power of

substitution precisely because it invokes a living paradox. After all, it is because theatre actively invites a *consciousness* of this paradox that the belief of the audience is already constituted as implicitly treacherous. This is why, if the actor permits one false note to enter into his performance, theatrical mimesis is immediately shattered against the suppressed reality on which it rests. Notwithstanding this ever-present threat, the actor is willing to take his chances. Conscious of his technique, which he takes great care to conceal from the audience, the actor possesses the sure knowledge that the paradox is there to be mastered.

Still, mastering the paradox comes at a cost – as Sartre was to point out when discussing the *personality* of the actor, who is, he says, ‘first of all a stolen child, without rights, truth, and reality, a prey to some sort of vampires’.²⁴ Let us then attempt to bring the paradox into view at its acutest point, since it is one thing to explain the structure of the paradox with reference to the belief of the audience in relation to the actor’s performance and quite another to speak of it with regard to the situation of the actor in relation to himself. The problem for the actor is this: in order to substitute himself for another, to use himself as an *analogon*, the actor must, according to Sartre, be able to convince himself of what he knows to be false. In other words, for Sartre – and he is not alone in thinking this – my faith in the actor, the foothold by which his being obtains traction, demands a rather more difficult act of faith on his part: to be credible he *must* believe himself to be *what he is not*. This ‘act’, as we shall try to show, is in fact an *operation* of consciousness whose aim is to indeed *neutralise* belief, thus permitting the actor to believe in the unbelievable. How feasible, though, is such an act of faith? It is to this question that we must now turn our attention, and in doing so, reconnect theatrical mimesis to the problem of

originary mimesis with which we began. We shall do so by exploring the analogy Sartre draws between the situation of the actor and that of bad faith.

The Ontology of the Actor and the Paradox of Bad Faith

Without as yet deciding one way or the other whether the actor really is in bad faith we might at least note a peculiar isomorphism in the structure of belief requisite to the success of the actor's performance and that of the structure of belief involved in Sartre's attempt to establish the viability of bad faith: both invoke the same puzzle of 'self deception'. To propose the following as a working hypothesis in order to think this puzzle through: bad faith belongs to the being of the actor just to the extent that the actor employs 'bad faith' as the *technical* means of mastering the paradox of acting. Consider this claim in light of Sartre's remarks on the actor and corresponding remarks on the problem of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*:

The player's technique (...) consists primarily in using this *analogon* for the imaginary emotion which he must experience fictitiously. For feeling in the unreal is not *failing to feel*, but deliberately deceiving oneself about the meaning of what is being felt; indeed, the player clings to the unacknowledged certainty that he is not Hamlet at the very moment when he is publicly *manifesting himself* as Hamlet and *for the purposes of demonstration* is obliged to convince himself that he is Hamlet.²⁵

The true problem of bad faith stems evidently from the fact that bad faith is faith (...) the essential problem of bad faith is a problem of belief (...). How

can we believe by bad faith in the concepts which we forge expressly to persuade ourselves?²⁶

The puzzle, in short, boils down to the question of how anyone could *consciously* deceive themselves. So what does the structure of belief constitutive of bad faith have to tell us about the ontological basis of theatrical mimesis? To begin the task of unravelling this, we might adapt a question raised by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* and ask: ‘What must be the being of man, if he is capable of *being an actor*?’ We might also predict in keeping with the above hypothesis that our answer to this question will be the same as that given by Sartre in response to the question of the possibility of bad faith: ‘The condition of the possibility for bad faith [and thus of being an actor] is that human reality, in its most immediate being, in the infrastructure of the pre-reflective cogito, must be what it is not and not be what it is’.²⁷

To explain what this means, a quick recapitulation of Sartre’s ontology is in order. Recall, for Sartre, human reality is distinguished by the peculiar two-facedness of man’s *mode* of being. On the one hand he can be seen as determined by brute circumstance – he is a facticity. On the other hand, he exists as a free possibility that has the power to ‘nihilate’ that facticity – he is a transcendence. The consequence of this is that man embodies a paradoxical tendency in his very being. He strives to be what he cannot be and cannot be what he must be.

In other words, just as it is right to say that the actor is not Hamlet, so in another sense it is right to insist that he must be Hamlet if he is to be an actor. Firstly, if we take Hamlet to be a something realisable then the actor cannot be it; no matter how committed the actor may be no amount of preparation can *make* him Hamlet. *In this sense Hamlet is ‘unattainable’*. On the other hand, if we understand Hamlet as a

type of commitment that the actor can take up and press into, then not only can the actor 'be' Hamlet, he *must* be Hamlet if he is to be at all. To be an actor, one must adopt Hamlet as a *way of being*. What allows him to do this, moreover, owes everything to the stark fact that he is nothing *in* his being; the actor's own being is 'unattainable'. In this sense Diderot was not far off the mark when he said 'Perhaps it is just because he is nothing that he is before all everything'.²⁸ In Sartrean terms, he *is* nothing *because* there is no such *thing* as a 'propertied' self – because a self that possessed a proper nature, which coincided with itself, would not be *a self*; it would be '*en soi*' - a *thing*. Indeed it is only because for Sartre consciousness is nothing in itself – *is nothingness itself* – that it is always free to decide for itself *who* it will be: 'Freedom', he tells us, 'is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness'.²⁹ The consequence of this freedom? – the for-itself *lacks* 'a certain coincidence with itself (...) [it] lacks a certain particular and concrete reality (...) [which] would transform the for-itself into itself'.³⁰ That's why in order for the self to be at all it must press into what it is not; this is the meaning of Sartre's enigmatic assertion '[man] makes himself be'.³¹ His very nothingness compels him to self-interpret via a determination that can only be his provisionally.

To examine this peculiarity in closer detail consider once again our example of the relation of an actor to his role. The standard interpretation explains this relation in terms of the actor 'representing' the character through the performance of scripted actions. Be that as it may there is an alternative way of accounting for this relation, specifically by looking a little more closely at what is going on in the *being* of the actor. The idea is this: contrary to the standard interpretation, when an actor plays Hamlet, he *is* in a de facto sense *being Hamlet*. That is to say, there are grounds on which we can understand statements of the sort 'Olivier is Hamlet' in a non-

metaphorical and non-hyperbolic sense. Specifically, the actor is Hamlet insofar as through his actions Hamlet is *intended*. Only by intending Hamlet in his actions is it then possible to say that a ‘Hamlet-effect’, a ‘theatrical representation’, is engendered in the minds of the audience. But observe, there are two separate issues involved here, however tacitly voiced. Firstly, to say that the actor is Hamlet insofar as he intends Hamlet is not to say that the actor is not also in another sense quite distinct from Hamlet. He has a distinct *facticity* of his own: for instance, we need not deny that the actor has a life that is entirely independent of his being Hamlet. Another way of putting this point is to say both actor and audience fully recognize the theatrical nature of the experience; that it involves ‘make-believe’ – an ‘as if’ world and not a real world. And yet on a second look I want to suggest that the actor is not *just* acting *as if* he were Hamlet, that is, he is not just *playing* Hamlet. Rather, when he acts the Hamlet role he *plays himself* as Hamlet. Hamlet in this second sense is no mere representation – on the contrary, the actor does not *act* a representation of Hamlet, he simply acts *Hamlet*. Hamlet is what we might call a ‘fictive’ identity that the actor assumes; an identity whose intentional threads are unified by a certain *conception* on which his gestures are trained. In performing actions relevant to the goal of being Hamlet, the actor becomes a placeholder for this ‘Hamlet identity’ which he inhabits in living it. For the actor, Hamlet is not a representation but a *way-of-being*. This is because the being of the actor is attained only in his pressing into Hamlet as a way to be. This interpretative content not only makes sense of being-an-actor, it makes sense of the *being* of the actor – his being thus becomes *concrete*.

There is an important sense of course in which this entire proposal should be seen – and quite rightly so – as factitious. If we take it that being Hamlet is something the actor could attain in the sense of a substantive identity that would uniquely

distinguish him as *the* Hamlet, we would say the idea was either risible or that anyone holding such a view must be deluded, perhaps even psychotic. Commonsense is enough to tell us that no-one is Hamlet in *that* sense. What, though, is the lesson of this example? Well, on the one hand, I take it to lie in the distinction made here between the *mimetic* ‘as if’ of play-acting and what I have called (so as to distinguish it) the *fictive* ‘as’ of self-interpretation. The actor invokes *both* senses of the ‘as’ when playing Hamlet – the fictive and the fictional. Now admittedly the formal character of the fictive ‘as’ is quite obscure; so what does the fictive ‘as’ of interpretation tell us about who we are as selves?

One way of putting the idea is to say that my ability to self-interpret is not distinct from my ability to self-identify. Interpretation occurs *in* identificatory acts through which I manifest specific commitments. Identification should not be understood here in its usual psychological sense (for instance, when we identify with someone we admire, when we secretly yearn to be that person). Rather, identification, in this context, signifies an operative, pre-cognitive exercising of what Sartre calls our having-to-be. In this sense, acts of self-identification are not reflective but *performative*. I identify myself *as* someone with a certain taste in music – say, expressing my preference for Debussy over Chopin – primarily *in* my listening habits. In short, identification occurs in the reflexive processes of self-articulation through *doing* something. Significantly, however, while the self *is* only in self-interpretative identificatory acts of the kind we have already described – Sartrean ‘projections’ – it is not and cannot be, in any strict sense, *identical* with those projects with which it identifies itself. On the contrary, such identities can only function – just as Hamlet does for the actor – as placeholders for my commitments. What this means is that we are all a little like the actor; we are all, each in our own way, ‘*playing at being*

Hamlet'. The difference is in our case we do tend to take the 'fictive as' to be rather more substantive than it actually is. How we self-identify indeed provides us with a determinate identity, but in the very determinateness of those ways-of-being by which we move through our world, our sense of who we are can never be *ultimately* defined. Of course, to say that my personal identity is fictive is not to say that it is merely fictional. Although, it is to say that who I am is made concrete only in identificatory acts of pragmatic self-assertion. Identities are fictive, then, in a sense we might call, following Heidegger, 'non-genuine'.³² That is, a fictive identity is non-genuine to the extent that it does not and cannot ultimately answer the question of 'who' I am. It becomes *inauthentic* and non-genuine, however – that is to say, factitious – when I believe that it can or *does* answer this question. And that is what is wrong with the response of *bad faith* to the unsettling fact that my being is always and unceasingly 'in question' for me, for in bad faith what I attempt to do is precisely convince myself that I *am* or can *be* 'truly' myself.

As Sartre, in his celebrated example of the café waiter, demonstrates – in bad faith

[what] I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the rights of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o'clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired. As if from the very fact that I sustain this role in existence I did not transcend it on every side, as if I did not constitute myself as one beyond my condition.³³

One can trace in this passage precisely the kind of slippage that makes bad faith possible, between the above termed fictive *as* of self-interpretation and the fictional *as if* of mimetic performance. In this way, to quote the sociologist Erving Goffman, ‘one finds that that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality’.³⁴ In other words, while I can attain an understanding that my projects are both provisional *and* necessary in disclosing my self-interpretative commitments, I can also *deny* their provisional status by *imagining* them to embody attributes or qualities that I actually possess, such that what I am merely ‘playing’ at being comes to define ‘what it is to be me’ in some essential way. This is most evident in the case of social role-playing, hence Sartre’s example. In interpreting myself *as* a café waiter I must act *as if* I were one. And in acting as if I were a café waiter, I can easily believe myself to *be* one. This becomes bad faith precisely because in order to be ‘convinced’ by my ‘as if’ I must hide from myself the consciousness of my freedom – that is, I must hide my *lack* of conviction.³⁵ For Sartre, that this slippage is possible owes everything to the power of consciousness to ‘derealise’ itself through mimetic substitution: ‘I can be [the café waiter] only in the neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the typical gestures of my state and by aiming at myself as an imaginary café waiter through those gestures taken as an “analogon”’.³⁶ What remains to be answered here is how I can be ‘taken in’ by my own act.

Let me suggest an answer to this by briefly running through some of Sartre’s principal conclusions. In a nutshell, bad faith describes an act of freedom that *denies* itself. This might appear incredible since it seems the only way I can deny my freedom is to exercise my freedom. But there is no contradiction here once we understand by this that freedom asserts itself surreptitiously *in bad faith*. Bad faith is

bad *faith* because *as* a suppressed consciousness of itself it exists nevertheless in a consciousness *of* this suppression. Denying that it is *for itself* it nonetheless *posits* ‘for itself’ the impossible ideal of being an *in itself*. Living in bad faith means, for example, that my being a café waiter rests on a denial that I have any choice in the matter, that I have no freedom to be anything other than a café waiter, even though, as we have seen, I cannot *be* a café waiter and that in principle it is always open to me to be otherwise. Yet despite this, Sartre insists, bad faith is not *cynical*. Existing in a consciousness of this suppression means precisely *that this consciousness is suppressed*. That is, living in bad faith is not something I consciously *do* to myself; it is a precognitive reflex belonging to consciousness as it turns away from itself in fleeing its own nothingness (freedom). I fall into bad faith as easily as falling asleep, says Sartre.³⁷ However, unlike sleep, bad faith is not a *state* of consciousness but a fundamental *attitude* of consciousness – one that throws up strategies designed to preserve itself in bad faith. Once again, Goffman is useful in understanding how these strategies fabricate reality by distinguishing, metaphorically, between ‘front’ and ‘backstage’ activities. The café waiter throws himself wholeheartedly into the illusion of his *setting* rather as the actor does on stage. The equipment and paraphernalia of the café are the means by which he demonstrates his competence or proficiency in the part he has assigned himself; they are like so many props by which he solidifies his identity. This illusion is supported and reconfirmed day in and day out by his fellow workers and by the customers who pass through the café – all play their part in sustaining the fiction that the waiter’s situation is his fate and destiny.

Hence Sartre says, at one point, a consciousness in bad faith constructs around itself a *Weltanschauung*. In as much as it constitutes an *attitude*, however, it is irreducible to this construct. Rather, bad faith is itself an original comportment or

project. It *is* a mode of consciousness in which consciousness *appears* to itself to be what it is not and it appears to itself to be thus ‘in all good faith’. Yet it is not quite sincere either: for a consciousness that is in bad faith can only be convinced by its own ruses if it renders all belief unconvincing – and so it ‘believes itself and does not’. In this way it arrives at what Sartre calls ‘non-persuasive evidence’, which is to say, it can persuade itself that it is what it is not only because it does not ask ‘too much’ of itself.³⁸ Were its standard of evidence higher, were it actually sincere, it could not sustain the fiction that it projects; its strategies would crumble before its very eyes just as would its world. Let us take note of this crucial point for here we arrive at Sartre’s answer to the question of how bad faith is possible, and so, by extension, at the answer to the question of the possibility of the actor’s mastery of the paradox. Bad faith is explicable, says Sartre, only if it is possible to conceive of a belief ‘which wishes itself to be not quite convinced’.³⁹ The condition for the possibility of such a conviction – self-neutralising belief – is this: I am not what I am, and so, I am not and cannot be equal to any particular belief I happen to entertain regarding myself. No belief deriving or sustaining the self-conception through which I interpret myself has the solidity of a ‘fact’. Sartre explains: ‘Every belief is a belief that falls short; one never wholly believes what one believes. Consequently, the primitive project of bad faith is only the utilisation of this self-destruction of the fact of consciousness’.⁴⁰ To apply this to the case of the actor: it is only because he is *not* wholly convinced by himself that he can find a basis for *convincing* himself that he can be wholly *other* to himself. This ‘basis’ is the non-ground of his own being, his own nothingness. This is what the actor grasps and plays with, however inarticulately, and which allows for the self-conscious or ‘technical’ employment of the stratagem of

bad faith: the slippage of the mimetic *as if* and the fictive *as* of self-interpretation through which he is able to utilize himself as an *analogon*.

There are two questions I would like to touch on to wind things up. Firstly, does this analysis signify that the actor is necessarily in bad faith? And, secondly, what light does it shed on the broader problem that can be identified with Sartrean ‘freedom’?

To answer the first question as a lead-in to the second: asking whether the actor stands in bad faith because his technique employs the same operation of consciousness by no means, on my view, necessitates his *living* in bad faith. Nor, however, does it *prevent* him from doing so. Certainly some of Sartre’s later remarks on the actor would suggest Sartre believed he was in bad faith, at least to the extent that he is ‘assimilated’ by bourgeois culture as a ‘solid citizen of unreality’.⁴¹ But this does not prohibit the opposite, either: could one not conceive of an actor of *commitment*? – Brecht certainly did. The issue at stake presently is, in any case, different: should the stratagem of bad faith *put* one in bad faith? To answer this we need to acknowledge a fundamental difference exists between the situation of bad faith and the situation of the theatre. It is the latter context that after all determines the actor’s deployment of bad faith. The theatrical situation – the situation of theatrical mimesis – is a *quasi*-situation and knows it. It stages a quasi-reality, dramatizes quasi-problems, and demonstrates through quasi-evidence possible resolutions. What, we might ask, is the point of this apparently superficial and useless expenditure? Sartre’s answer: theatre is demonstrative – by its means we are brought to an explicit consciousness of the *act*. The act, he tells us, is –

[a] free enterprise (...) for this freedom to exist it must at least lie in the very elements of an act, which is a venture, has a purpose, is projected, is concerted. This, therefore, is what we primarily see in theatre: people embarking on a venture and performing acts in order to do so (...) every act comprehends its own purposes and unified system; anyone performing an act is convinced that he has a right to perform it; consequently we are not on the ground of fact but of right (...). This very fact brings us to the true ground of theatre, in which it is not what is going on in the actor's heads that concerns us, but watching a conflict of rights.⁴²

Theatrical mimesis is connected ultimately by Sartre to the ethicality of one's situation precisely because it places at the forefront of one's consciousness the questionability of one's very being. It shows – or at least in Sartre's view of it – that living is a task for which there is and can be no bedrock of certitude, but is rather a void that I must fill. How I choose to do so matters and indeed profoundly so, as theatrical conflict – 'drama' – demonstrates: in order to justify my choices I must do so by means of my commitments – through my action and in confrontation with the situation in which I struggle to assert myself.

An uncommitted life, conversely, is one that eschews the perpetual need for justification and elects instead for the soft option of rationalisation. It is a life lived in bad faith. Now we have said that the situation of the theatre is a quasi-situation and knows it. By contrast, the situation of bad faith is a quasi-situation that takes itself for reality. And this difference is crucial: for if the actor is the master of the paradox – is a master of the technique of bad faith – he is so *not for the purpose of self-deception but for the purposes of demonstrating what is possible by acting it*. The waiter, on the

other hand, is not the master of bad faith but its servant. The actor's situation reveals, then, a fundamental disparity with that of the waiter's: on these grounds at least he is not in bad faith in his deployment of bad faith. One might take this difference more specifically yet in characterising the peculiarity of the actor's situation. Mastering the paradox means mastering the *difference* between one's own nullity and the 'something' that one has to be – the actor is neither one nor the other but falls in the space between. How might one define this 'space'? In fact we have already said: it is the liminal space of play, the 'gestic'. The actor plays his being in this space and simultaneously puts play at the forefront of his being. Regarding this observation it is worth recalling what Sartre has to say on the issue of play in *Being and Nothingness*: 'As soon as man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom (...) then his activity is play. The first principle of play is man himself; through it he escapes his natural nature'.⁴³

This does not, of course, *prove* that the actor is not in bad faith. What it does allow however is a new way of articulating the paradox of the actor. Just as the actor can provide a model for bad faith, so equally he provides us with a counter-model: what he shows is that – in play – it is indeed possible to master *the difference between being and nothingness without annulling it*. For this reason, the *solution* to the problem of Sartrean *freedom*, manifested in the paradoxes of 'originary mimesis' – and according to which bad faith is merely its *inverted* expression, inasmuch as it is a mode of freedom that wishes itself not to be free – one way or another proceeds to this existential insight, which is exemplified by the secret art of the actor.

-
- ¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge, [1939] 2006), 48.
- ² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis', in *Typography*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 255.
- ³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, [1940] 2004), 20.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 187
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 188
- ⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, [1943] 1972), 32.
- ⁷ Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), 13.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, eds. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Frank Jellinek (London: Quartet Books, 1976), 165-6.
- ¹¹ Sartre, *Theatre*, 162.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 163.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Sartre, *Imaginary*, 20.
- ¹⁶ Sartre, *Theatre*, 167.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ¹⁹ Sartre, *Imaginary*, 191.

-
- ²⁰ Sartre, *Theatre*, 167.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ²² Sartre, *Imaginary*, 191.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Sartre, *Theatre*, 170.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.
- ²⁶ Sartre, *Being*, 67.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Diderot 1883, 53
- ²⁹ Sartre, *Being*, 28.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 553.
- ³² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robertson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, [1927] 1962), 146.
- ³³ Sartre, *Being*, 60.
- ³⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), 28.
- ³⁵ Sartre, *Being*, 580.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60, translation modified.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ⁴¹ Sartre, *Theatre*, 170.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴³ Ibid., 580-81.