

*What Is Visible When Acting?
Acting-Out, Passage à l'Acte and
the Dialectics of the Gaze in Phenomenology
and Psychoanalytic Theory*

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Abstract: The paper approaches acting from a phenomenological and psychoanalytic point of view. It sheds light on the intrinsic (*i.e.*, invisible) resorts involved when someone is playing a role – or, better yet, *assumes* a role. In order to make these mechanisms visible, the paper relies on the premise that acting always involves *an act*. Using the Lacanian theory of acts, I demonstrate that there is a *real* process taking place when assuming a role, namely when the subject needs to *objectify* himself. This process can be traced back as far as the “time” of a pre-existent gaze. The aim of the paper is to substantiate the idea that it is necessary for the gaze to enter a dialectics in order for the subject to find its objective place. For illustration, two works of art are used: the performance *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramović and the movie *A Woman Under the Influence* by John Cassavetes.

Keywords: act, desire, gaze, objectify, the Other, *presence without assignable present*, the Real, (in)visible.

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1. Introduction. The Gaze: Process and Instrumentalization

I use the following as an argument for my paper:

The dialectic of the gaze is maintained on this plane. What counts is not that the other sees where I am, but that he sees where I am going, that is to say, quite precisely, that he sees where I am not. In every analysis of the intersubjective relation, what is essential is not what is there, what is seen. What structures it is what is not there.¹

This quote, taken from the first seminar of Jacques Lacan introduces the idea of an existing “dialectic of the gaze”. This dialectic is in close relation to the emergence of the Symbolic register and encompasses the possibility of seeing an absence, i.e., the invisible. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, I use the term “invisible” in its phenomenological meaning, namely as something necessary for the visible to emerge². Thus, the question that the title of my paper poses finds an answer in the following: when acting, the invisible is visible.

My paper exploits “acting” in its double meaning: as *playing*, or interpreting a role (e.g. in a play or a movie) and as *doing* something, an operation or a process, for the eventuality of an outcome. The latter is useful for the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the act, while the former instrumentalizes the emergence of the visible. In conjunction, the two raise the same issue regarding the possibility of a pure act, namely an act having only one meaning or another. My hypothesis is that, because of the obscurity of the invisible that the visible feeds off, “acting” is always to be found in its two above mentioned meanings. Therefore, a pure act is an impossibility.

This axiom can also be applied to the act of seeing. As a result, seeing is not only a process, but also an instrumentalization. Using these two notions (i.e., “process” and “instrumentalization”), I want to explain the quote used in the opening of this paper. The first part – “the Other sees where I am” – implies a process, namely the process of seeing someone. Its outcome is to

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991), 224.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 150-153.

objectualize *that* someone or to perceive them as being something, *i.e.*, an object to be seen. The other part, highlighted by Lacan, is “that he sees where I am not”. This corresponds to the instrumentalization of seeing, meaning that in seeing someone, the perceived object and the presupposition (the projection) of something beyond the object³ are equally important. Thus, the seer attributes a role to the one being seen, a role one can choose to play, or not. There is this hallow of invisibility that one may, or may not, be aware of, but he/ she can still be concerned about it at some imperceptible level. As Lacan puts it, the question “what am I for the desire of the Other?” always lingers somewhere, hidden, and motivates one’s actions. It is the same as asking “what *role* does the Other attribute to me?” and “will my actions follow this role, ignore it or rebel against it?”.

The question regarding the desire of the Other is the same as inquiring what the Other sees. Thus, an easy answer is hard to find as there is always some degree of obscurity present in the eyes. There is not only the blackness of the holes in the middle of each eye, but also the *punctum caecum*, the blind spot analogous to the phenomenological unconscious that is able to remember this obscurity⁴. As one can see neither without the black holes of the eyes, nor without the *punctum caecum*, one cannot *assume* a position into the world without the (phenomenological) unconscious. According to Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious is not behind, but in front of us, making the objects possible, thus visible:

This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our “consciousness”, but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact that it is not an object, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read – It is between them as the interval of the trees between the trees, or as their common level. It is the *Urgemeinschaftung* of our intentional life, the *Ineinander* of the others in us and of us in them.⁵

³ What I intend to emphasize is already commonly expressed in the saying “more than meets the eye”.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 247, 248, 255.

⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 180.

This comes after a long phenomenological tradition centered on the theory of intentionality. One of the strongest points of this theory is the distinction between “intentionality as object-directedness and intentionality as a pointing-beyond”⁶, based on the observation that not all experiences are object-directed. It is the contribution of phenomenology to consider non object-directed experiences as intentional, thus making intentionality an “openness to that which is other than the subject”⁷. Merleau-Ponty exploits this broader sense of intentionality in his theory of perception, of which the phenomenological unconscious is part. This allows him to state that the unconscious is not an object, but it is that which makes all objects possible⁸.

In terms of process and instrumentalization, I claim that instrumentalization is what makes the process of seeing possible. In other words, before seeing an object *qua* object, one sees beyond it, thus seeing it where it is not (*i.e.*, pointing-beyond). Following this idea, to see is necessarily to gaze. And in the gaze, the act of *seeing* involves *acting*.

2. The Synthesis of the Dialectics of the Gaze

A particularity of the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is to consider any act as being the complex result of the interaction between the three registers which make up reality (the Real, the Symbolic, the Imaginary)⁹. When meeting the gaze of another, “process” and “instrumentalization” are not the only elements involved. Beside these imaginary and symbolic traits that the act of seeing upholds, thus constructing not only an image but a *narrated* image, the Real is also present as something eluding both image and narration. This is why the gaze can sometimes be anguishing and captivating. The two opposed dispositions coexist in this Real dimension of reality in the same way that they are coexisting in the Kantian theory of the sublime.

⁶ Shaun Gallagher, Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 116.

⁷ Shaun Gallagher, Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 116.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2007).

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*.

To consider the Real as being analogous to the experience of the sublime is not far-fetched. Lacan himself addresses the Real as being the experience of the impossible. For the cognizer, experiencing the impossible equates to experiencing the incapacity to grasp a particular defined meaning. Facing this incapacity, the cognizer is prone to admitting a fault in its constitution as a cognizer, enabling him/ her to re-cognize him/ herself as being subjected to error. From the Lacanian point of view, this recognition echoes the fundamental lack around which the subject can constitute itself as the subject of the unconscious. Without being the synthesis of the dialectics of the gaze, the Real is the necessary condition enabling the synthesis.

The dialectics of the gaze is nothing more than a dialectics of the visible and the invisible, in which the third term is represented by the very subject of this process.

The synthesis is the subject.

Thus, "the fact that the Other sees me where I am not" is a mere presupposition on the part of the one subjected to the gaze of the Other. It is an imaginary projection resulting from this dialectical process that, nevertheless, involves the Symbolic and the Real. Therefore, the result of this dialectical process is alienation.

Moreover, the subject is already there, where he thinks he is not, and where he thinks the Other can find him. This is why the gaze of the Other can be, at the same time, an opportunity for the subject to recognize his/ her *own* subjective position. Bottom line, it offers the opportunity for the *ideal ego*, the *ego-ideal* and the *superego* instances to unfold. It can become clearer for the subject that it is *he* who has the capability "of making himself other, and to end up thinking that the other, being himself *an other*, thinks like him, and that he has to place himself in the position of a third party, to get out of being this other who is his pure reflection"¹⁰.

This process of alienation described by Lacan is something that has already begun with the famous *mirror stage*. The gaze of the Other can be an enabler for an experience which proves formative for the subject. Starting

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955 (Book II)* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991), 180.

from the gaze of the Other, the subject can enter a process of alienation at the end of which he/ she finds him/ herself as being the synthesis of the very process he is part of. He also finds the gaze as something belonging to the Other, thus objectifying the gaze: the subject sees the gaze as gaze.

Before being a particular object, the “gaze” pre-exists as something “in which the subject is originally seen from everywhere”¹¹ (our translation). Anita Izcovich suggests in this quote that for Lacan seeing precedes gazing. At the beginning, without the active presence of a subject, the pure process of seeing is developing itself only in the register of the visible. This characteristic of the “pre-existing something” suggests the idea of transparency for the subject. It applies to the subject and to otherness, and it relates to the infantile omnipotence that Freud is speaking about. The illusion of being transparent to the others and to him/ herself gives the infant the idea that everything is possible. But as the image of the Other is more and more outlined, the illusion begins to *fade away*. The image of the Other casts a shadow onto the subject and the zones of opacity begin to occur. Simultaneously, the splitting of the *ego* begins, and the pre-existent “gaze” exists as gaze.

If the ideal *ego* stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be and how I would like others to see me), the *ego*-ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my *ego* image, the big *Other* who watches over me and propels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize; and the superego is this *same* agency in its revengeful, sadistic, punishing aspect. None of the three instances can exclusively represent the subject, nor can all of them put together. They do give a position for the subject as alienated subject, but they do not represent his uniqueness, his singularity. A proper representation of this trait is in fact *impossible* – it is consequently a mark of the Real.

If the subject represents a synthesis of the dialectics of the gaze, there are transparencies and opacities (*i.e.*, the visible and the invisible) which converge. Relating the visible with alienation and the invisible with the mark of the Real, it is rather the latter that the artist tries to express. It is not the subject itself that the artist is interested in, but its uniqueness.

¹¹ Anita Izcovich, *La femme, la lettre, et l'image* (Paris: Stilus, 2016), 49.

Such is the case of a work by Marina Abramović, entitled *The Artist is Present*. In it, people from the general public are invited to sit, one by one, in front of the artist, as part of the performance. The two participants engage in mutual gazing, *the gaze of the other* being what the performance is all about. In the aftermath of the event, two things stand out from the comments of Marina Abramović: (1) the surprising number of people willing to partake in the performance and (2) the strong emotional reaction of those involved in it. A wide range of feelings, from joy to sadness, are exposed on the faces of the participants in the performance, but they all seem to have one thing in common: the tears in their eyes. The iconic images of people crying are the final results of the performance and they present themselves as a mystery of the silent face-to-face human interaction.



Fig. 1. Reactions of the participants in the performance *The Artist is Present*.

When questioning the source of the mystery of such spontaneous and moving reactions, the possibility that something pertaining to the Real is involved cannot be dismissed. When facing the gaze of the *other*, the subject confronts not only the mirroring image of *another*, or his own image and

projections, namely all the symbolical and imaginary aspirations which alienate the subject, he also discovers the *Other* as the one in which he is already alienated (Lacan). But the real mystery lays beyond the *Other*, in the pre-existent layer of the “gaze”, as the *Other* itself is barred.



Fig. 2. Snapshot of the performance *The Artist is Present*.

Confronting the gaze of the artist, the question that arises is if the artist is simply another – an *other* –, the *Other* or something else. In other words, if *the artist is present*, as Marina Abramović declares, how is his/ her presence felt? He/ she no doubt represents alterity, but he can also stand for something else, for an invisible beyond, pertaining to a *presence without assignable present*¹². Barring the artist in his alterity, the participant in the performance becomes a performer himself. The act that he performs is as obscure as the pre-existing “gaze” of the presence without assignable present.

¹² See Marc Richir, *Phénoménologie en esquisses. Nouvelles fondations* (Grenoble: Millon, 2000), 127.

3. Real Acting and Acting for Real

According to the Lacanian theory, there are two acts concerning the subject: the *acting-out* and the *passage à l'acte*. To these two a third one is added, which has a special status. This third act is considered to be the analytical act and it is described in terms resembling a performance. Thus, as far as the gaze is concerned in an analytical act, its effectiveness is performative. That is not to say that what is involved in this special type of act is only a simulacrum. On the contrary, something real is involved, and a real change can be observed in one's attitude towards himself and towards the *other(s)*, at least according to the Lacanian theory. But isn't this also the goal of the performance art? The performance as such tries to avoid the simulacrum and aims to *act for real*.

It is not without relevance to note that when speaking about *acting-out*, Lacan always uses the English form of the word. He does so not only to emphasize the difference between the two types of acts – *acting-out* and *passage à l'acte* – which is difficult to express in French, but also with the explicit purpose of taking advantage of the ambiguity raised by the word *act/ acting* in its English expression. My hypothesis is that for Lacan it is important to use a word which can suggest the fact that this particular type of act about which he speaks involves not only the representation of something by action, but also the dimension of acting, *i.e.*, of interpreting a role in a play or in a movie (or, why not, in a performance). Thus, the key element in this whole affair of the *acting-out* is the double meaning of the word *act* (*i.e.*, to do something and to play a role).

It is not by chance that Lacan uses the metaphor of the scene to illustrate what *acting-out* and *passage à l'acte* connote. By doing so, he only follows Freud, the first one to use it when he talked about the unconscious: the unconscious as the other scene. This assertion requires a nuanced approach, as it is true only for the neurotic subject. The psychotic subject ignores or dismisses the other scene. Based on this major difference between the neurotic and the psychotic, Lacan justifies the difference between the two acts. Thus, *acting-out* is a neurotic act, while *passage à l'acte* is a psychotic one. Another careful approach is necessary here: it is important to take into

account the fact that a single act does not represent the subject alone. A signifier is what represents the subject and, more specifically, “that which represents a subject for another signifier” (Lacan). Thus, an act does not suffice to assess one’s structure.

In fact, both *acting-out* and *passage à l’acte* are ways to elude one’s structure. In Lesson 9 of the *Seminar X. Anxiety*, Lacan says that what differentiates the two is only the direction in which the subject leaves the scene. In the acting-out the subject leaves the scene towards another scene (*i.e.*, the other scene), while in the *passage à l’acte* the subject leaves the scene towards the “real” world. To put it simply, the subject leaves the scene in some paradoxical way, refusing to act (*i.e.*, to play a role). “Thinking” he will meet the “real” world (the reality), the subject faces up to the fact that in *passage à l’acte* the attribute of the real does not pertain to the world, but only to the Real itself.

There is no scene in performance art, and Marina Abramović posits in some instances that performance art is not theatre. The argument brought in support of this idea is the same argument of the real. In performance art, whatever is happening is real, Abramović says. Hence, the *act* is real and, at the same time, there is no *acting*. But what about the *other scene*? Does the “acting” happen in the dimension of the unconscious? We must consider this assumption to be true if we want to explain the fact that the performer is able to resume his/ her everyday existence after the performance is finished. The same difficulty of the simulacrum arises here. I would add to this the observation that, despite the fact that performance and theatre must be differentiated, performances are carefully prepared, and cannot be fully comprehended without knowing the idea behind them. Ultimately, they are motivated by the same unconscious aspiration towards the Real, present not only in performance art but also in contemporary art in general.

For a long time now, *beauty* has ceased to be an ideal in art. Art has become more and more interested in dreams, in phantasy, in that which is hidden or uncanny, and in all sorts of extreme situations that can pertain only to the *sublime*. Its aim is to captivate and to make the public *gaze* upon the works of art, not just to *look* at them with contentment and admiration. I advance the idea that desire for the gaze of the Other (not the other) has become an ideal in contemporary art because it can find its *origin* (*originality*)

in it, namely it can find its uniqueness and singularity. Through his art, the artist places himself in this point of unicity from where the pre-existent gaze is perceived, thus embracing a *presence without assignable present*. In all of Marina Abramović's performances, the aim is to reach such a degree of intimacy. It is especially the case in the above mentioned *The Artist is Present*.

In her art, like all important contemporary artists, Marina Abramović uses a wide range of human affects, which can also be found in the Lacanian table of acts: inhibition, impediment, embarrassment, emotion, symptom, dismay, anguish¹³. All is done with the more or less explicit intention of dazzling the viewer and confronting him with the gaze of the Other, in the event that he will be able to go beyond his/ her imaginary identifications (e.g. someone facing an artistic act) and towards his/ her own uniqueness.

4. Desire as Effect of the Dialectics of the Gaze

If the subject represents the synthesis of the dialectics of the gaze, desire represents its effect. In order to correctly assess the statement that proposes desire as an effect of the gaze, it is necessary that we extend the concept of gaze.

The gaze is not located just at the level of the eyes. The eyes may very well not appear, they may be masked. The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an *x*, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object.¹⁴

This quote from Lacan validates such a move. Extending the concept of gaze signifies, first of all, that "to see" and "to gaze" can now be clearly separated. Because the eyes are not necessary for the gaze to exist, the gaze becomes rather a feeling one has: *the feeling of being seen*. Hence, *the gaze* is subjective, while *seeing* is objective: the gaze is *the subjective* way in which the subject *objectifies* himself.

¹³ See Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 13.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991), 220.

It is not always easy to identify the meaning ascribed by Merleau-Ponty to “to see” and “to be seen”. The difficulty is given by the fact that in Merleau-Ponty’s theory the subject is rather always *objectified* by the other (not the Other). Even though it represents an intrinsic factor of being into the world, the field of vision seems to be extended only to the image that the other puts forward. Thus, the opacity of the other situated in front of me is given by the image itself: the image is visible and invisible at the same time. Of course, a very complex phenomenology of perception is involved here, a phenomenology which does not exclude the necessary function of the (phenomenological) unconscious. For Merleau-Ponty, the relation to otherness is not one-sided and it involves reciprocity, even if he makes it clear that the other does not see me the same way I see him. The difficulty is now deepened: how to explain the fact that two persons meet, especially since they are both objects for each other?¹⁵ The answer comes much later in his writings: the meeting does not take place in the visible, nor in the invisible, but at the limit between the two and on the edge of the visual field:

We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it *opens us to what is not ourselves*. This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be *present* to us in the original and whose *irremediable absence* would thus count among *our originating experiences*. [...] But, if only in order to see these *margins of presence*, to discern these references to put them to the test, or to interrogate them, we do indeed first have to fix our *gaze* on what is apparently *given* to us.¹⁶

I postulate that this presence of an “irremediable absence” situated on the “margins of presence” is indicative of *the presence without assignable present* that Marc Richir is talking about. The fact that Merleau-Ponty considers it to be one of “our originating experiences”, which “opens us to what is not ourselves” is highly significant. Without this *openness*, the *otherness* would not be possible and this openness originates in a “present” absence.

¹⁵ See the beginning of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Merleau-Ponty claims that objects *see* one another.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 159. Emphasis added.

It is a paradox indicating that the presence (of the other) is never complete. Fixing our gaze on the other helps realize this truth (exactly the effect that *The Artist is Present* has). It is to be noted that Merleau-Ponty uses the word “gaze” in relation to what is given, considering that something *to be given* indicates the idea of some *thing* addressed to us. It is addressed to us (given) and consequently it concerns us. A subjective dimension is therefore introduced, justifying the use of the word “gaze”.

Even if he has the necessary elements for an early indication of *the presence without assignable present* and the subjective dimension as well, it is still difficult for Merleau-Ponty to acknowledge the possibility of the subject to objectify itself. One possible solution for this impasse is exactly the Lacanian *Other*, which could act as a buffer between the subject and the *other* and between the subject and the subject’s own assessment. In Lacanian terms, there is this Other whose desire the subject seeks, while also having to manage it. Coming from the irremediable absence of the pre-existent gaze, desire is channeled by a *symbolical Other* (not by some image of otherness, *i.e.*, not the imaginary *other*, but the symbolical *Other*). When either the effect of the dialectics of the gaze or the Other is missing, it becomes difficult for the subject to recognize his position... in the eyes of the other.

This is what happens in John Cassavetes’s movie *A Woman Under the Influence*.

5. Conclusion: When Act(ing) Meets the Real

In the construction of his movie, Cassavetes brilliantly uses a wide range of affects, especially embarrassment and dismay. These affects reach the point of maximum intensity close to the moment of the final scene, when a party to celebrate Mabel’s return from the psychiatric hospital is given by her husband. The movie depicts the family drama between Mabel (played by Gena Rowlands) and her loving husband, Nick (played by Peter Falk). Mabel’s erratic behaviour affects the family life and culminates in her being confined to a mental hospital. After her release, Nick gathers a lot of people to celebrate her recovery. Realizing that this may be too much for Mabel,

Nick dismisses the guests before her arrival (another embarrassing scene) and scales down the party to the close family. It turns out that this is still too much for Mabel. She wants to be alone with him, she says. An embarrassing dialogue with the members of the family takes place, with Nick constantly trying to “calm” her down. Finally, losing his patience for what he perceives as inappropriate behaviour, he reacts strongly. He fixes his gaze on her, insisting: “Just be yourself!”.



Fig. 3. Scene from *A Woman Under the Influence*.
Nick asking Mabel to “be herself”.

This request, accompanied by the gaze (of the other) puts Mabel in a very difficult position. She cannot *re-act*. Neither *passage à l’acte*, nor acting-out can help her express her subjective position. Facing the impossibility of the *demand*¹⁷, she *fades away* for a moment...

¹⁷ I want to reiterate the idea that for the dialectics of the gaze to work, it is not *the demand of the other* that is necessary, but the *desire of the Other*.



Fig. 4. Scene from *A Woman Under the Influence*.
Mabel's moment of depersonalization.

In the very next moment, she *hopelessly* asks for her father's help. But she already knows (unconsciously) that insisting on demand means insisting on the impossibility of satisfying it without first addressing what is beyond demand, namely desire. Ultimately, it is her father's desire that she is addressing and she knows this will make him uncomfortable. The father, as a figure of the Other, *cannot respond to her desire by desiring her*. There is once again this impossibility which expresses the interdiction of the Real. In order to defuse this (in)tense and hopeless situation, the father makes a classical Freudian *Witz*. When asked by Mabel: "Dad... will you stand up for me?", he takes it literally. But, at the same time, his gaze expresses impotence and despair in front of the Real.

For the participants at the party, his *Witz* is not a laughing matter. In a way or another, everybody recognizes the impossible (and tragic) present situation. When the mother (*i.e.*, another figure of the Other) discreetly points it out, the father leaves the scene, taking the mother with him. Once the parents are no longer present, the situation escalates to violence.



Fig. 5. Scene from *A Woman Under the Influence*.
Mabel's father "standing up" for her.

In pointing out these scenes my intention was to focus on what I consider to be the nucleus around which the action of the movie revolves. This nucleus is "the structure of any sadomasochistic phantasm" (Lacan) and it is expressed as follows:

In the first form of libidinal apperception of the other, at the level of the point of re-ascension starting from a certain momentary eclipsing of the libido as such, the subject does not know what he desires most, the other or the intervening *third party* [i.e., the Other].¹⁸

It is not an exact assertion that only Mabel has trouble deciding between *the other* and *the Other*. The others must be taken into consideration, as well. But, after all, all these others, including Mabel, are mere characters in a movie that someone made. And that someone who made the movie has some personal ties with his characters.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 205.

There are some very striking historical facts that strongly link Cassavetes to his film¹⁹. These are not just the “usual” *invisible* linkages, but quite *visible* ones. What is visible is the fact that Cassavetes wrote the story for his wife Gena Rowlands (who plays Mabel). It was intended for *theatre*, but Gena Rowlands considered it to be *too intense to be played on a stage*. The movie was created independently with great effort, since nobody wanted to invest in a movie about a “crazy, middle-aged dame” (Alderink). Mabel’s mother-in-law is played by the director’s mother, thus the real-life mother-in-law of Gena Rowlands. Mabel’s mother is her real-life mother. And finally, the name of Mabel’s husband, Nick, is homonymous to that of the son of John Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands, who is also their only son.

All these historical facts validate the assumption that the movie, produced, directed and written by Cassavetes is rather a performance. Like in Marina Abramović’s performance, the artist is not the only one involved (*i.e.*, present). The viewer is involved, of course, but, more importantly, the actor is involved. As demonstrated above, the actor is personally involved, thus becoming a performer himself. And again, like Abramović, Cassavetes relies in his staging on an enigma situated beyond the visible. It is a strategy through which the act(ing) meets the Real.

For the participants at the party, his *Witz* is not a laughing matter. In a way or another, everybody recognizes the impossible (and tragic) present situation. When the mother (*i.e.*, another figure of the Other) discreetly points it out, the father leaves the scene, taking the mother with him. Once the parents are no longer present, the situation escalates to violence.

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Figure 1 <https://virtualartistresidency.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/artist_is_present_sitting_with_marina.jpg >

Figure 2 < <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/images/uploads/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present%402x.jpg> >

Figure 3 < <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/DwH9h4HKAXs/hqdefault.jpg> >

Figure 4 < <https://offscreen.com/images/influence-stand-up-for-me.jpg> >

Figure 5 < <https://offscreen.com/images/influence-stand-up-for-me2.jpg> >

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