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PART FOUR

ENLIGHTENMENT AND COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT
Representation is a dyadic relation. It consists of two relata, one standing for the other. Some argue that it is a triadic relation, adding that representation is always restricted to a particular set of properties or aspects in the two related concepts or items. Thus, \( x \) can represent \( y \) in, for instance, form or diplomatic interests, but not in other matters. If that is the case, nothing can represent another thing \textit{tout court}, or without qualification. But the nature of these qualifications or constraints on the relation of representation is of crucial importance in both aesthetics and politics. Roughly speaking, the fewer the constraints on the relation of representation, the more controversial (or according to Rousseau’s view, “dangerous” and deceptive) it becomes.

There is something paradoxical in the relation of representation. On the one hand it is a relation of identity: the represented and the representative are the same, the represented being only \textit{re}-presented. On the other hand, the two cannot be identical, since only by being different can the representative stand for the represented (for example, by knowing more about a particular set of interests of the other party in the case of politics; or by expressing in a more effective manner certain character traits of a particular human being in the case of art). In that respect, there is something strange in the notion of an entity representing itself. Thus, representation consists of being and not being another thing at the same time.

This fundamental tension in the concept of representation goes deeper than its manifestations in theatre and politics. As is well known, the concept of \textit{person} is rooted in the Latin term \textit{persona}, which is the analogue of the Greek \textit{prosopon}. It means both the mask (through which the voice of the actor is heard on the Greek stage) and the face of an individual (which is considered the focus of expression of a human being). While a mask is a representation of a figure other than that of the individual wearing it, the face is not a representation of a human being; it is identical with it, or at least a constitutive part of it. But even the face is partly alienated from
the inner self and plays a masking role in the way the self is presented to others. Thus, expressions such as “make a face” or “save face” allude to the difficulty in distinguishing between what an individual “really” is and the way that individual appears (or rather is made to appear) to others, between the person’s presence and his or her representation. Thus, although a mask is a representation of someone, the individual’s persona is both what that person is and the way he or she is seen through it.1

Some philosophers, most prominently Plato, view this ambiguity of the asymmetrical relation of representation as an indication of its ontological and epistemological deficiency. A representation is just a faded version of the original—less real, less true, and of a lesser value. Typically in the arts, representation involves imitation, and imitation invariably falls short of what is imitated. This metaphysics of representation served as the cornerstone for Plato’s condemnation of poetry and its exclusion from the ideal republic, but it became also the origin of the long antitheatrical tradition in Western thought, of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau is arguably the most powerful spokesman.2

The fundamental difference between Plato and Rousseau in respect of their concern with representation is that the former focuses on the ontological and epistemological shortcomings of representation while the latter is interested in the moral and political—even, we may add, existential—dangers of that basic relation. For Plato, the flaw in poetic images, especially in the theatre, is that they are not real, and engaging with them diverts the spectator from the search for knowledge. Rousseau is more worried about the moral corruption and potential political abuse involved in the pretense of claiming to represent something or someone. In Plato representation undermines objective truth; in Rousseau it obstructs the way to authenticity and moral virtue.

However, both philosophers are sensitive to the common structural paradoxical nature of representation. Despite their sharp condemnation of theatrical and political representation, they are well aware that there is no way to completely dispense with it. Not only is representation metaphysically necessary (as in Plato’s theory that the phenomenal world reflects

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1 The Hebrew term partzuf, etymologically derived from the Greek prosopon, attests to the same ambiguity of “true face,” on the one hand, and “double face,” on the other. It denotes both the inner self and its possibly misleading appearances.

2 The classic work on this tradition is Jonas Barish, The Antitheatrical Prejudice (Berkeley, 1981). Chapter 9 is devoted to Rousseau. Barish’s work is at once a systematic review of the antitheatrical tradition and a defense of theatrical representation.
ideal reality): it is a constitutive trait of our humanity. For Rousseau, consciousness, language, art, and sociability (politics) are conceptually linked to the power to represent; representation is the price of the transition from the state of nature to a civilized mode of existence, that which we recognize as human. The tension of being and not-being oneself is inextricable from human existence, art, and politics. The aim of this paper is to examine this inescapable tension, of which Rousseau is acutely aware. It will argue that Rousseau does not, in fact, think that he can completely overcome the distance between reality and representation; and that his real project is to sift out legitimate and authentic modes of representation from the wide range of illusory and delusory simulacra.

Theatre as Anathema

Rousseau’s letter to Jean D’Alembert concerning the theatre is an astonishing diatribe, which reflects both his personal biases and his philosophical views. The circumstances of its formation are well documented. In 1757, D’Alembert published the entry “Geneva” in the seventh volume of the Encyclopédie. On the whole it expressed a very favorable, even admiring, evaluation of that city’s economic and political system, as well as its morals and culture. In the last section of the article, D’Alembert offered a friendly suggestion; namely, to consider the introduction of a theatre to the city. This would make the city less dull and be an attraction to both actors and visitors from throughout Europe. Rousseau was outraged by this idea, and overreacted to it: he was personally offended by it, inflated its dangers, and turned it into an issue of conscience which could not be laid aside. In 1758, he published his lengthy response, Lettre à M. D’Alembert sur les spectacles,3 which ignored almost all the other topics raised in D’Alembert’s article. Rousseau himself testified in the preface to the Letter that his response was written in a melancholic atmosphere of loneliness and bitterness. Ironically, some of the paragraphs in the preface read like a dramatic text delivered by an actor on stage, trying to represent the protagonist (Rousseau), who is struggling to authentically express the struggle against the very idea of the stage and the adequacy of representation! Note, for example, the last sentence of the preface: “Reader, if you

3 All the references to this source in this article are to the widely used English translation by Allan Bloom: Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre (Ithaca, 1968). Page references to this text are given in parentheses in the body of the text.
receive the last work with indulgence, you will be welcoming my shade, for as for me, I am no more” (7). Rousseau, the author, becomes a faded representation of his real self, which does not exist.

The historical background for Rousseau’s emotionally intense response was Voltaire’s decision in 1755 to establish a small theatre in his new home, not far from Geneva, to which he invited members of Geneva’s upper class. Theatres were legally banned in Geneva for most of the first half of the eighteenth century, being considered unfitting for a Calvinist society and a dispensable luxury. Hence it is easy to see why the “citizen of Geneva” saw Voltaire’s move as a direct threat to his beloved city, and why D’Alembert’s proposal triggered a fierce counterattack (Voltaire is the real object of this attack, rather than D’Alembert, for whom Rousseau has warm words in the Letter). But beyond these historical circumstances, the Letter should be read in light of Rousseau’s philosophical critique of the arts and sciences in general, beginning with his 1750 First Discourse (On the Sciences and the Arts), in which he condemns all the arts for their corrupting effect on society. This earlier tract highlights the moral and political dangers accompanying the development of arts and sciences rather than their inherent flaws as representations of reality. In that respect, the First Discourse is of lesser philosophical importance than the Letter itself (which might explain why Rousseau himself described the earlier work, in his foreword to its 1763 edition, as “at best mediocre”). But the general critical tone is fully established already in the earlier essay.

As is always the case with Rousseau, there is a sense in which his philosophy should be read in part as an expression of his biography. Thus, the passage in the Confessions where Rousseau describes the moment in 1749 when he first encountered the problem of the relation between arts and morals is articulated in “revelatory” terms (“The moment I had read these words I saw another universe and I became a different man”). Earlier in his biography, Rousseau’s sensitivity to the tension between appearance and reality can be traced to the formative experience in early childhood of being unjustly accused of breaking a comb and his obstinate refusal to admit to this misdeed even under the threat of harsh punishment (“the [apparent] case against me was too strong and it prevailed over all

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5 Confessions (trans. A. Scholar; New York, 2000), 341–42. Rousseau describes his intense experience as one of “agitation bordering on delirium,” and retrospectively believes that it changed his whole life and explains all his later misfortunes.

my protestations"). Against the conventional rules of meting out punishment to a mischievous child, young Jean-Jacques displays what is going to be his lifelong struggle for integrity and inner truth. And one does not have to be dogmatically committed to psychoanalytical reading in order to trace the first sense of existential rift and separation to the story of Jean-Jacques’ mother’s death while giving birth to him, and to see this experience as the source of his never-ending effort to restore his lost integrity.

The theatre for Rousseau is anathema in all its dictionary senses: an object of revulsion; something to be denounced and banned; and a curse. Although Rousseau admits that he personally liked the theatre and “has never willingly missed a performance of Molière” during his stay in Paris (131n.), he loathed the theatre culture—the pretense of the audience and the degenerative life led by the actors and actresses. Although he thought that in some societies, most typically the Parisian, the theatre should be allowed (and even considered as having some benefit), he firmly believed that it should be outlawed in small republics such as Geneva. Finally, the theatre is a “curse” in the sense developed in The First Discourse: i.e., a notable symptom of the decadence of civilization and high culture, a sign of the fall of “natural man.”

Rousseau’s critique of the theatre in the Letter is rich and variegated. On the social and political level, he is concerned with its disastrous effect on the cohesion of society and the solidarity of its members. Although the “spectacle” (the original term used by Rousseau for the theatre) is a public event, it takes place in a dark space which leaves the spectators lonely and imprisoned in their private individual experience (analogous to Plato’s cave, as has been noted by all Rousseau scholars). And although the drama on stage makes the spectator feel empathy with the protagonists and identification with their suffering, these emotional responses are short-lived and superficial, and disappear once the show ends. More

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6 Confessions, 18. This story is followed by the famous “reverse” one, in which Rousseau falsely accuses a maid of stealing a missing ribbon that he himself has coveted (82–83). The latter incident proved to be no less traumatic for Rousseau and served as one of his motives for writing the Confessions.

7 Confessions, 7. Since this paper’s focus is theatre and politics rather than Rousseau’s (auto)biography and his desperate attempt to achieve transparency in his writing, I cannot go into his highly complex (and often cruel) self-analysis of his own (perceived) failure to reach his readers and represent himself properly. See particularly his late work, Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques, in The Collected Writings of Rousseau: Vol. 1 (ed. R. D. Masters and C. Kelly; Hanover, NH, 1990). The three dialogues forming this book display in a most acute manner the inner rift between Rousseau’s public image (persona) and his true self, which he believes no one understands.
disconcerting from the moral and political point of view, through the theatre the audience feels relieved of its genuine moral responsibility towards fellow citizens. The exercise of pitié comes cheap or even cost-free (25). The spectator is typically swept up by his emotional reactions to the fictitious events on the stage, suspending autonomous moral judgment. In Rousseau’s view, contrary to the long Aristotelian tradition of appreciation for the deep cathartic effect of staged drama, the theatre does not leave any genuine and lasting mark on the human heart. Since it appeals to emotion rather than to reason, a play cannot make anyone more virtuous. Yet for political rulers, the theatre is for these very reasons a most effective tool, which allows citizens to let off steam by providing them with “bread and circuses” while creating a false sense of participation.8

Rousseau passionately argues that the theatre as an institution has a deleterious influence, promoting idleness and escapism. The indecent lifestyle of the actors and particularly the actresses is a corrupting model for society. It undermines basic morals (moeures, manners), those social habits which are the backbone of a healthy society. The theatre widens social gaps and increases inequality, since it is a costly venture and requires high ticket prices. Furthermore, public funding of the institution should be avoided since the theatre is merely a luxury, and as such not only superfluous, but indeed an outright corruption of the republican virtue of austerity. Rousseau’s list of the potentially harmful effects of the theatre is long, and I shall not deal with it here.9 The focus of this article is on what Rousseau seems to view as the original sin of the theatre, namely, the fact that it is based on representation. Behind all the social criticism of the theatre—political and moral—lies a general condemnation of

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8 Just a few years after writing the Letter, Rousseau shows a somewhat more conciliatory approach to the theatre. Although he still thinks that the theatre has no moral value, he recommends taking young people to the theatre in order “to study taste, not morals”; for although taste is part of “the art of being a connoisseur in matters of little importance,” it contributes to our enjoyment of the (nonmoral) good things in life. See Émile (trans. B. Foxley; London, 1974), 309–10.

9 A theme that preoccupies Rousseau but will not be discussed here is the feminine nature of the theatre and the threat it poses of the feminization of society and culture. This image of the theatre is associated with its seductive power, its love of ornament, the passivity of its audience, its frivolity, vanity, and its exclusive concern with love (Letter, 47–57). Elizabeth Wingrove makes a forceful argument that for Rousseau a major danger in the theatre is the inversion of sexual roles and the confusion of the feminine and the masculine. Wingrove, “Sexual Performance as Political Performance in the Lettre à M. D’Alembert sur les Spectacles,” Political Theory 23 (1995): 587–618.
representation as the source of false appearances, insincerity, and human alienation.

**Immediacy and Vision**

Rousseau is rightly regarded as the originator of the modern ideal of *authenticity*. Although he rarely uses the actual term, authenticity might be regarded as the highest virtue in his moral view. It applies to both the public and the private spheres and is associated with his view of human nature and the inherent threats to its integrity. From his early writings, particularly the *Second Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality*, Rousseau sketches the process of the degeneration of “Man” from a primordial utopian natural state to his present corrupt condition (putting into original use a genealogical method over a century before Nietzsche). Human nature is eternal, but history, the very movement of change in time, introduces into it a “split,” between the true inner self and its external appearance. The process itself is irreversible, but through political and educational means, human beings can strive to mend that split. Obviously, the counterpart of the virtue of authenticity is hypocrisy, which becomes in Rousseau the chief vice of modern individuals and society: the vice of deceitful appearance governed by social convention. It is no coincidence that much of the *Letter* discusses Molière’s plays.

Jean Starobinski has highlighted this fundamental obsession with authenticity in Rousseau more than other commentators and his work has served as a starting point for many Rousseau scholars in the past four decades. Starobinski describes Rousseau’s conception of evil as originating in the gap between “the outer countenance” and “the heart’s disposition” and labels Rousseau’s challenge the “scandal of deceit.” The unity of the individual is broken in childhood, as it is in the early phases of humanity’s development. Starobinski refers to this break using the notion of *opacity*: we have become opaque not only to each other but, more disastrously, to our own selves.\(^{10}\) The fundamental aim of both the individual and society is the “restoration of transparency”; according to Rousseau, this can

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\(^{10}\) Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (trans. A. Goldhammer; Chicago, 1988 [1971]). See particularly ibid., 3, 5, 11, 13, and 180. Starobinski sensitively notices that although Rousseau gave up personal relations with his surroundings, he nevertheless struggled to make himself transparent at least to his readers, using the genre of confession as his communicative tool.
be achieved either through the individual’s complete withdrawal from society (as in Émile; or as in the solitary existence of The Reveries of the Solitary Walker), or through political action (as in The Social Contract). Mediation becomes, in Starobinski’s terms, an “obstruction” which must be overcome. This mediation is most typically apparent in the relation of representation, which, as we have shown in the first section, involves in its very nature a rupture between what something is and the way it appears (is represented).

In the rest of this article I wish to examine the way the idea of transparency serves Rousseau in his critique of both the theatre and the political system, then argue that the ideal of complete transparency or authenticity is philosophically incoherent, and finally suggest that Rousseau was not only aware of the futility of the search for “immediacy” but was willing to consider legitimate forms of mediation or representation.

Transparency is an optical term, as is spectacle (often used by Rousseau to refer to the theatre). Transparency is the ultimate expression of immediacy in the visual sphere. However, it is typically self-defeating, in the sense that absolute transparency makes things invisible: only when light rays are “broken” do they form a spectrum of colors; and only when light is reflected by an object does the object become visible. Vision is thus physically conditioned by some form of “obstruction.” Furthermore, vision is the most “intellectual” of the five senses since it perceives the most distant objects and in that way resembles conceptual thinking. “I see” serves as a metaphor for understanding (in contrast to “I smell danger,” or “it is touching,” which allude to more intuitive and less

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11 There is also a parallel expression of the search for transparency in Rousseau’s philosophy of religion and in his insistence on the primacy of conscience over “acquired ideas.” Conscience is an innate, natural sentiment and is infallible; judgment is externally acquired and a less trustworthy guide in morality. See Rousseau’s The Creed of a Priest of Savoy (trans. A. H. Beattie; New York, 1956), 42–44. Rousseau was skeptical of revelation because it is based on human testimony that mediates between God and the individual, involving reliance on others people’s reports.

12 In a tantalizing staging (in 2002) of Richard Strauss’s opera, Die Frau ohne Schatten, the late German director Herbert Wernicke portrayed the semidivine Empress, who has no shadow, (obstruction!) as belonging to a fully transparent world, invisible to anyone else and narcissistically imprisoned in self-reflection (a Rousseausqe amour propre). Only by descending to earthly existence and encountering the imperfect but human relationship can she rid herself of her glassy existence, obtain a shadow and overcome the curse of sterility. At the end of the performance, Wernicke dropped a semi-opaque veil on the stage which consisted of bulbs and cables, the means of his creation of the idealized staged “spectacle,” thus exposing the “deceit” on which the whole production was based and suggesting that without some measure of opacity, nothing can be represented.
intellectual mental perceptions). Vision is the most discriminatory and refined sense, and the richest in its linguistic representation. But this means also that it is typically more mediated by concepts than are experiences that come through the other senses. Although Rousseau does not discuss this hierarchy of the senses, his view implies its reversal: music is superior to painting and theatre; and dance, based on direct bodily (kinesthetic) sensation (like touch), is the most intimate expression of what we are and feel. Thus, music and dance, as we shall see, are the artistic alternatives to the representational art of the theatre.

In a way, Rousseau predicted the condition of modern society, in which visual images have become the mediators of human experience and social relations. His warnings concerning the harmful impact of the theatrical spectacle on citizens, in terms of anonymity, loss of solidarity, and the confusion of reality with “virtual reality” is a precursor of the contemporary critique of television and internet culture, as Margaret Kohn has recently shown. The public space, based on seeing (one another) rather than interacting and debating (as in Habermas’ public sphere), creates passive and depoliticized citizens who can be easily manipulated by political authorities. Life itself becomes a “spectacle,” in which we are spectators rather than participants.

About a generation after Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham offered his radical proposal for penitentiary reform in England, based on the same principle of transparency. In his Panopticon (1787), Bentham adopted his brother’s architectural design for a perfect prison, a circular structure in which prisoners could be permanently kept under observation. He believed that such a design was suitable also to hospitals, madhouses, manufactories and schools. He disclosed, albeit in a cursory manner, his deeper thoughts on the notion of permanent observation by claiming that:

Ideal perfection, if that were the object, would require that each person should actually be in that predicament during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so.

15 Jeremy Bentham, The Panopticon Writings (ed. M. Bozovic; London, 1995), Letter I. Rousseau is mentioned in the chapter on schools (Letter XXI), where Bentham ironically comments that he would have resisted the idea of constant inspection for Émile, but would have probably embraced it for Sophia.

Being “inspected” is a key to social reform and moral self-correction. Notice the twist from Rousseau’s ideal of transparency as personal authenticity to the social reformist view of this ideal in Bentham. Rousseau should be understood as searching for a “panopticon of the self” towards absolute transparency of one’s own consciousness, transparency which is denied in the relations with other minds.

This explains why the theatrical gaze is for Rousseau a mere illusion. Peeping into other people’s lives through protagonists on stage can never provide us with genuine insight because the objects of theatrical look are not real but represented figures which are mere substitutes. Unsurprisingly, these figures evoke only second-hand emotions which, unlike Bentham’s “omnipresent inspector,” cannot stimulate any moral transformation in the spectator. For Rousseau, the spectator is passive and hence the victim of emotional manipulation and flattery, rather than the active moulder of moral character (27). Only when we leave the theatre culture for that of the traditional clubs and public festivals do we get closer to mutual transparency and hence to genuine fellow-feeling (which can be contrasted with Bentham’s unidirectional relation of hierarchical supervision).

Theatre, Clubs, and Festivals

The theatrical manifestation of representation is acting. To the question of what the talent of the actor is, Rousseau answers:

It is the art of counterfeiting himself, of putting on another character than his own, of appearing different than he is, of becoming passionate in cold blood, of saying what he does not think as naturally as if he really did think it, and, finally, of forgetting his own place by dint of taking another’s. (79)

Acting creates a rift—first, between the actor and the dramatic figure he portrays; secondly, within his own self; and finally, between himself and the spectators. Since the figure represented is fictitious, Rousseau bluntly says that the actor “annihilates himself, as it were, and is lost in his hero” (81). This is the gravest sin—the loss of individuality—and a serious moral blemish; for how can a decent man play “a rascal’s role in the theatre…using all his talent to make criminal maxims convincing, maxims for which he himself has only disgust?” (81). Acting is the ultimate menace to moral integrity. So for Rousseau, the very nature of the theatre as fictitious is directly responsible for the moral degeneration of
the actor. But it is also the source of the rift between the actor and the spectator. In direct contrast to the nineteenth-century doctrine of “the suspension of disbelief,” Rousseau argues that

most tragic actions are only pure fables, events known to be inventions of the poet, and so do not make a strong impression on the audience; as a result of showing them that we want to instruct them, we no longer instruct them. (28)

The spectators’ awareness of the contrived nature of what they see on stage makes any attempt to create genuine feelings of compassion self-defeating. The actor can never be convincing when the audience is aware that he himself does not believe in what he declaims.

What I might designate the “secret understanding” between the actor and the spectator concerning the nature of theatrical illusion concedes to the theatre but one aim—entertainment—and its test of success is the audience’s applause. Hence the actor’s desperate effort to flatter the audience, to appeal to its expectations and taste. From the moral and political perspective, the theatre, according to Rousseau, is typically conservative, lacking any transformative effect.

Rousseau complements his radical critique of the theatre by reminding the readers of his Letter of the ideal alternative; that is, forms of public entertainment which are not based on mediation, imitation, and deceitful representation. Not only is the city of Geneva threatened by D’Alembert’s proposal—it simply does not need a theatre. It already has its own unique traditional forms of public diversion. Rousseau refers to festivals and to the cercles (clubs, or, in the more distant past, “societies”). These are usually informal meeting places for about fifteen men who “gamble, chat, read, drink, and smoke” (99). Their members are also engaged in walking and sports. Women have their own clubs in private homes where they play cards, serve refreshments, and are busy in “inexhaustible gossiping” (99). In both formats, these amusements are “simple and innocent” (100), based on equality and intimate friendship, thus maintaining some of the

16 It is interesting to contrast Rousseau’s view of the art of acting with that of his contemporary, Denis Diderot. Diderot sees nothing wrong per se in imitation, and the more emotionally distant the actor keeps himself from the figure he portrays, the greater he is as an actor. Furthermore, truthful acting does not mean showing things as they are in nature, and the chief virtue of an actor is the ability to imitate emotion without feeling it; to represent any character because he himself has no character. See The Paradox of Acting (ed. W. Archer; New York, 1957 [1778]), 19, 20, 33, 46, 48, and 71.
ancient republican morals. Most important for our discussion is that the clubs are exempted from the artificial norms of refined rhetoric, fashion, and bourgeois manners, which are so central to the Parisian salon culture (105). Directness in human relationships is often connected by Rousseau with vulgarity, but vulgarity is morally superior to the indecency associated with the theatricality and hypocrisy of the salon. Even though the “circles” have some negative side effects, they are not—like the theatre—bad in themselves (107–8). Even gossip, which constitutes much of the female clubs’ activity, has a redeeming feature which is interestingly connected to the ideal of transparency and its Benthamite implementation:

How many scandals are prevented for fear of these severe observers? They [the women in their cercles] almost perform the function of censors in our city. It is thus that in the great days of Rome, the citizens, watching one another, publicly accused one another out of zeal for justice. (106)

Exposure to real people, one’s fellow citizens (unlike fictitious heroes on stage), promotes virtue and justice in the community. Such activities create a mutual social panopticon!

The even better antidote to the theatre in Geneva is the festival. Unlike the theatre, the festival takes place in the open air and in full light. Consequently it does not exacerbate loneliness but creates a true sense of commonality. It does not suffer from the alienating effects of the theatre since it does not represent anything. People are not passive spectators but active participants. They are engaged in a mutual relationship of interacting with one another, rather than in the unidirectional relationship of watching a show on stage:

But what then will be the objects of these entertainments? What will be shown in them? Nothing, if you please. With liberty, wherever abundance reigns, well-being also reigns. Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united. (126)

Although Rousseau does not mention in this context his fundamental distinction between amour de soi and amour propre, the way he describes the festival expresses his faith in the festival’s ability to bridge the gap between the two. Amour de soi (love of self) is the natural sentiment which natural man shares with the animal world; it produces virtue and humanity in creatures like us who are governed “by reason modified by pity.” In the state of nature “each particular man regards himself as the sole spectator
to observe him" as well as judge his merit. *Amour propre* (self-love), on the other hand, is vanity. Its crucial component is *comparison* to others, seeing oneself *through* others, being obsessed by the way one looks to others as the source of self-esteem. This is the sentiment which gradually develops in tandem with civilization, social cooperation, property, and self-consciousness. It is a typically *mediated* sentiment and cognitively requires the ability to represent an image of oneself and of others.

Now, the two kinds of love usually seem incompatible or mutually exclusive to Rousseau; their presence creates the dilemma of the need to choose between the mode of precivilized, natural existence, to which we cannot and do not wish to return, and the inauthentic mode of struggle for self-definition through others (involving vanity, vengeance, greed, and competition). The theatre fosters *amour propre* and narcissism, but the festival is a miraculous unification of individuals into a community since it enables them to "see and love" themselves in the others. How is that achieved?

The secret of the festival lies in its spontaneity, the lack of premeditated structure. Unlike the theatre, it is based on music and dance, rather than "spectacle." Both these arts are nonrepresentational and refer directly to human emotions without the mediation of concepts and images. They do not depend on language or other symbolic representations. They are communal without being competitive; they are self-sufficient in the sense that they require no pomp or showing off. The festival creates ecstatic conditions in which participants lose their individual *personas* and do not know what they are doing.

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18 Dugan and Strong rightly make the point that this music is "formless," in contrast to Rameau’s harmony-based music, of which Rousseau took a harsh view. C. N. Dugan and Tracy B. Strong, "Music, Politics, Theatre, and Representation in Rousseau," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (ed. P. Riley; Cambridge, 2001), 334–35.

19 Much of this description is derived from a footnote at the very end of the Letter (135–36), in which Rousseau recollects his childhood experience at such a festival in Geneva, which he attended with his proud and patriotic father. Rousseau does not consider another form of theatre, which might have avoided many of his objections—that of the marionettes. It is worth noting that Kleist, two generations later, argued for the superiority of marionette theatre, due to the puppets’ total lack of consciousness. Kleist argues that the conscious movement of a body is necessarily unnatural and graceless. Only a marionette can be trusted not to slip into affectation—an argument Rousseau might have found convincing. Heinrich von Kleist, “The Puppet Theatre," in *Selected Writings* (ed. and trans. D. Constantine; London, 1997 [1810]), 411–16. And for a very similar and beautifully
Rousseau was no less interested in the issue of political representation than in that of theatrical representation. The structural analogies he traced between these two kinds of representation have attracted the notice of scholars. But the starting point of any such comparison must note the crucial difference: in the theatre the actor represents “a chimerical being” (81), whereas in politics real people represent real people. The problem of representation is accordingly different. The false or deceitful nature of the theatre originates from the fictitious status of the represented figures, and its moral flaw arises out of the implicit agreement between actors and spectators to ignore that fact for the sake of entertainment. The danger of political representation is associated with the pretense of one person to express another real person’s will. The problem of the theatre is that both actors and spectators are deluding primarily themselves, while in the politics of parliaments, representatives mislead their constituents into making them believe that they represent their will. A preacher, says Rousseau, in contrast to an actor, “speaks only in his name… the man and the role being the same” (81). Hence, he does not suffer from an inner split of personality. But when it comes to political representation, this split reemerges, this time between two individual wills. The issue is one of delegation rather than imitation.

Rousseau has Hobbes in mind when he elaborates his opposing reflections on political representation. Although Hobbes is exclusively concerned with political rather than artistic representation, his way of introducing the concept, derived explicitly from Cicero, is “theatrical.” Hobbes acknowledges the source and etymology of the concept of person in the Greek mask—“the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the Stage.”20 When someone is not representing himself, he is called an “artificial person”; and if he represents another real person, as in politics (rather than a fictitious figure on stage), he is regarded as acting with the authority of the represented person.21 Historically the relation of portrayed view, see Shmuel J. Agnon, Herrn Lublins Laden (trans. I. Kraft; Frankfurt am Main, 1997), 178–80.

21 Quentin Skinner, who offers a comprehensive historical background for Hobbes’s views in terms of the big constitutional debates in England of the 1640s, distinguishes between two models of representation—resemblance (imitation) and authorization, the former characterizing visual or theatrical portrayals, the latter the delegation of power. Skinner’s thesis is that the authorization model is adopted by Hobbes from his Parliamentarian opponents, even though the mechanism of authorization he advocates is...
authorization was first manifest in the legal proceedings of tribunals and was only later extended to the political context.

The authorization model is easier to comprehend when two individuals are related as representative and represented. But when it comes to politics, the representative stands and acts for many individuals. This gap between private and collective is a problem for any “individualist” philosopher like Hobbes and Rousseau. But the two resolve this tension in different ways. Hobbes’s original view is that the very act of authorization by many individuals is what makes these individuals a unified collective, one person (a “Body Politick”), a fact which enables the authorized individual (ruler) to represent them all:

A Common-wealth is said to be Instituted, when a Multitude of men do Agree, and Covenant, every one, with every one, that to whatsoever Man, or Assembly of Men, shall be given by the major part, the Right to Present the Person of them all (that is to say, to be their Representative). . . .22

And most importantly for our purpose is Hobbes’s statement that “It is the Unity of the Representer, not the Unity of the Represented, that maketh the Person One.”23

When we move to Rousseau’s theory of political representation we find a reversal of Hobbes’s view: it is only in virtue of some fundamental unity of the governed people (its volonté générale) that the power of the ruler is legitimized. Rousseau quotes Grotius as saying that “a people is a people before giving itself to a king.”24 This has interesting implications for the analysis of representation. In Hobbes we have just two stages, the natural and the social. In the one, people are a “multitude,” lacking any social structure; in the other they become a political community through the authorization of the sovereign. In Rousseau we have three stages: the natural, in which people resemble animals and lead a presocial way of life (albeit much more docile than in Hobbes); the civil, in which people associate with each other in the form of a social contract and become a people; and finally the political or constitutional stage, in which a political community decides the form of government appropriate to it. Only at the last stage does the question of representation arise.


22 Leviathan, 121.
23 Ibid., 14.
24 The Social Contract (ed. V. Gourevitch; Cambridge, 1997), 49 (Book I, Chapter 5).
This explains why for Rousseau, as against Hobbes, sovereignty is not created by an act of authorization and why the sovereign does not represent the people. Sovereignty lies in the people and hence cannot be detached from it or granted by it to any particular person or groups of persons. The nonrepresentational formation of the political body is described by Rousseau:

> At once, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body made up of as many members as the assembly has voices, and which receives by this same act its unity, its common self, its life and its will.25

Thus, from a multitude of individuals, each representing one's own self, people become a community, that is, individuals who represent themselves through their association with other such individuals. No one represents others. No private will, says Rousseau, can represent the general will. Only now, when a “republic” is created, can its (now) citizens choose representatives in the standard (Hobbesian) sense; i.e., those who will engage in the business of governing in their name.

Rousseau’s logic is compelling. Authorization is limited, since the will cannot be transferred or represented by a ruler: “The sovereign, which is nothing but a collective being, can only be represented by itself.”26 It seems that self-representation, in both arts and politics, is a metaphor which boils down to no representation. As noted by Rousseau commentators, the “general will” is pure and actual presence, both in the sense that it is unmediated existence and in the sense that it has no temporal permanence.27 It is immediate in both being unmediated and in existing now (rather than in the past or future). Unlike private wills, which are concealed in the privacy of the individual and hence are at least partly opaque to others, the general will, which expresses the common good, the res publica, is fully transparent, accessible to any person exercising his or her reason. It does not need representation because it is there, open to all.

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25 Ibid., 50 (Book I, Chapter 6).
26 Ibid., 57 (Book II, Chapter 1).
27 Dugan and Strong, “Music, Politics, Theatre, and Representation in Rousseau,” 332. And see Derrida’s famous reading of Rousseau, including his claim that Rousseau holds a naïve conception of representation. Derrida says that by assuming the difference between the representer and the represented Rousseau tries to go back to the original “presence” in both language and politics. But the only absolute presence is birth, which for Rousseau meant the origin of all his misfortunes. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (trans. G. C. Spivak; Baltimore, 1976), 296 and 309.
Rousseau says that in the republic created by the social contract people “call themselves citizens as participants in the sovereign authority, and subjects as subjected to the laws of the State.” This is the political analogue of the ideal of the festival, in which participants are at once actors and spectators. In both cases individuals are immersed in a collective entity, a community, in which there is no hierarchy and no asymmetry, which is typical of political representation and the theatre. The general will and the festival are both phenomena in which particularity gives way to unity, and alienation is overcome by a genuine sense of concord and rejoicing in the public good. Starobinski highlights this collective spirit as manifested in both the general political assemblies and the annual festivals. Both are spheres of full transparency.

“Where the Represented is, there no longer is a Representative,” says Rousseau. This is the ideal of direct democracy, of a system of government in which the sovereign (the people) is the governing body. But of course Rousseau is aware that such an unmediated system of popular government is empirically impossible and that every polity requires magistrates. He also argues that although the larger the number of magistrates, the closer the government is to expressing the general will, it is equally true that the larger the body of magistrates, the less effective is the governing body. In small communities, like the Greek polis or Rousseau’s Geneva, a relatively direct democratic system, based on periodical general assemblies, can be implemented.

Rousseau devotes a whole chapter to a damning critique of political representation. When citizens nominate delegates to the assembly rather than participate in it directly, the end of the state is near. The basic symptom of the decline of a republic is the priority given to the private interests as against the general good. In the context of our discussion, it is noteworthy that Rousseau points to the same fundamental danger in relation to both political and theatrical representation—the self-exemption from moral responsibility. By acting through representatives, citizens,

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28 *Social Contract*, 51 (Book I, Chapter 6).
31 *Social Contract*, 112 (Book III, Chapter 14).
32 Ibid., 89 (Book III, Chapter 2).
33 Ibid., 113–16 (Book III, Chapter 15).
34 Amal Banarjee makes an interesting comparison between Rousseau and Brecht. Both are highly suspicious of traditional theatre as having a real moral and political impact. But
exactly like the theatre spectators shedding tears about the fate of the virtuous hero, feel as if they have done their share (morally speaking) in identifying with and promoting the good. This is of course self-delusion; even worse, it may involve moral self-indulgence. Representation creates a vicarious sense of political action and participation. A central manifestation of such mediated citizenship is the use of money to buy services for the country that the citizens themselves should have provided with their own efforts (like hiring mercenaries to conduct wars). Money in general is considered by Rousseau to be another form of destructive mediation, a substitute for direct work and direct enjoyment.35

Mediation undermines freedom. People, who delegate the power to exercise their will directly, can enjoy only illusory freedom, the freedom from the hassle of taking responsibility for the running of the affairs of the state. This is similar to the illusion of the theatre audiences who believe they can express their identification and compassion with human suffering through identifying with fictitious figures on stage. The privacy and darkness of the polling booth gives us (that is, the few who still take part in the vote today . . .) that momentary and false satisfaction of participation in government, which is very similar to the sense of participation in the life of the dramatic personae in the theatre. “The English people thinks it is free,” comments Rousseau, yet “it is greatly mistaken; it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved, it is nothing.” This enslavement is inevitable, since, as we have seen, sovereignty cannot be represented: “either it is the same or it is different; there is no middle ground.”36 Worse, the very attempt to represent a people annihilates it as a people, since the people “represented” gives up its identity, as constituted by its general and inalienable will. The paradox of representation, as we have referred to it in the first section of the article, cannot be resolved.

Brecht tries to radicalize the theatre rather than reject it and believes that exactly by distancing the spectator emotionally from the stage, the danger of false (and easy) identification can be overcome. See Amal Banerjee, “Rousseau’s Concept of Theatre,” British Journal of Aesthetics 17 (1977): 175–76.

35 See, for instance, Confessions, 37: “I am less tempted by money than by things, because there is always between the money we possess and the object we desire some intermediary; whereas between the thing itself and our enjoyment of it there is none.”

36 Social Contract, 114 (Book III, Chapter 15). Historically, Rousseau points out, the very idea of representatives is modern, arising out of the feudal system of government, which is iniquitous, degrading, and absurd.

No Civilization without Representation

Going back to the optical imagery employed in the analysis of the ideal of transparency, we recall that light cannot be seen unless it is either broken or reflected, i.e., unless it encounters some form of "obstruction" or split. It seems that this principle of optics is a good metaphor for the working of consciousness in general, and for both the theatrical and political theories of representation in Rousseau. The fact that there is no frictionless reality, e.g., within the bounds of our planet, does not mean that physics should not have a clear notion about such an idealized reality when coming to formulate the laws of motion. Similarly, Rousseau states that

It is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to know correctly a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have precise notions in order to judge our present state correctly.

Rousseau realizes that we can never achieve complete transparency between individual consciousnesses, nor even within a single conscious being. But that does not mean that perfect lucidity is not the methodological standard by which we have to measure the validity and value of various kinds of representation, both in politics and in the arts.

The Second Discourse is a detailed genealogy of the irreversible evolution of human civilization from that idealized, "primitive," presocial existence. All the milestones in this long anthropological reconstruction are connected with mediation: that of general concepts in the formation of language; that of reason and cooperation in the creation of agriculture; that of the separation of individuals from each other in the emergence of property and the idea of justice. Even the most basic, prerational stance towards the other, which underlies all the other virtues, i.e., pity or compassion, requires the ability to stand in the place of the other—that is, to represent him or her. Of more direct relevance to our concern is the conception of the development of art out of leisure. People started

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37 Thus, even the ideally transparent essence of the divine realm in the portrayal of Strauss's *Frau ohne Schatten*, mentioned above, can be portrayed by the opera's director only in a system of glassy partitions and reflecting mirrors; i.e., means which can be perceived by our power of sight.


assembling around a tree, amusing themselves with singing and dancing. But then

Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best . . . became the most highly considered; and that was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice.40

These seeds of *amour propre*, pride and competition, proved to be “fatal to happiness and innocence,” which was of course not limited to art and amusement but quickly spread into the political sphere. Human beings started competing for power, honor, and wealth, using force and thus precipitating the deterioration of human society to a degree that compelled them to delegate their power to a ruler. But in the course of this gloomy description of the inescapable corruption of humanity, Rousseau admits the equally significant benefits:

[T]o this ardor to be talked about, to this furor to distinguish oneself, which nearly always keeps us *outside of ourselves*, we owe what is best and worst among men, our virtues and our vices, our sciences and our errors, our conquerors and our philosophers—that is to say, a multitude of bad things as against a small number of good ones.41

Only by distancing ourselves from ourselves can we achieve virtue and civilized existence. Some measure of alienation from the natural world, from other individuals and from our own selves is the key to the formation of any kind of culture as well as a well-ordered polity.

So, behind the scathing critique of representation, Rousseau never fails to recognize both its inevitability and its value. Rational beings cannot truly wish to return to their “savage” state, to the state of nature. However, Rousseau insists on distinguishing between *kinds* of representation, subjecting only some of them to the harsh judgment of the theatre and of the English system of parliamentary representation. The real sin for him is not neutral (or conscious) representation, but *impersonation*. The *OED* defines “impersonate” as “to pretend to be (another person) for the purpose of entertainment [theatre] or for fraud [politics].” In the theatre,

40 *The Second Discourse*, 149.
41 Ibid., 175 (my emphasis). See also 179: “The savage lives within himself; the sociable man, always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence.”
impersonation is deception;\textsuperscript{42} in politics, it is usurpation. Both are loathed by Rousseau, since they take us further away from moral truth and from freedom, respectively.

But there are legitimate forms of artistic and political representation. Without going in detail into Rousseau’s complex analysis of music (and recall that he was himself a semi-professional musician), his main reason for putting music above the theatre is that it does not represent anything in the world. But it does represent something in us, and that is emotion.\textsuperscript{43} Music creates an intrinsic, natural relation rather than the external and conventional relation of theatrical and pictorial representation.\textsuperscript{44} And even the theatre is not universally condemned. Since its deceptive nature and corrupting effect are context-sensitive, Rousseau concedes that in a corrupt society, like Paris, governed by bad “manners,” the theatre cannot really do much harm, whereas in good societies, like Geneva, it may cause degeneration.\textsuperscript{45} In other words, in evaluating the moral role of the theatre, historical and pragmatic considerations should be taken into account.

In politics, too, Rousseau regards direct rule as merely an ideal. A people can never rule itself in the literal sense. Government always requires some representation or delegation of power. It is indeed the case that sovereignty cannot be represented by another sovereign, but that does not mean that the “general will” is not represented at all. It is represented

\textsuperscript{42} David Osipovich, “What Rousseau Can Teach Us about Live Theatrical Performance,” Journal of Art and Art Criticism 62 (2004): 355–62. Osipovich’s thesis is that live performance is to be blamed for the deceptive nature of theatrical representation, and accordingly that painting and literature do not suffer from that threat.

\textsuperscript{43} Essay on the Origin of Languages (trans. J. H. Moran; New York, 1966), 59–61 (Chapter 15). In the following chapter Rousseau makes a controversial claim that music has an advantage over painting because it “can represent things that cannot be heard, while it is impossible to represent in painting things that cannot be seen” (64). See also the excellent article by Ruth HaCohen, which is a history of the idea of pity, sympathy, and compassion from Plato to the eighteenth century, with a particular emphasis on music. Unlike pictorial representation, which is spatial, music is based on sympathetic projection in time and can bridge the distance separating two subjects. Ruth HaCohen, “The Music of Sympathy in the Art of the Baroque: Or, the Use of Difference to Overcome Indifference,” Poetics Today 22 (2001): 607–50.

\textsuperscript{44} Dugan and Strong, “Music, Politics, Theatre, and Representation in Rousseau,” offer an insightful analysis of the way music solves the problem of representation for Rousseau. “Music does not by its nature require that we give ourselves over to that which is not our self” (346); i.e., unlike the theatre and representative government, in which our will is controlled by actors and politicians, musical experience arises out of our own imagination—that is, leaves us free and autonomous.


in the individual wills of the citizens. Unlike some readings of Rousseau’s doctrine, I suggest that the general will is not an independent abstract entity. All there is are individuals and their wills. They constitute the general will, which could not exist without them. But the general will is the function of the wills of individuals on the condition that they exercise it properly, namely by taking into account only what they themselves consider as the public good. The key text for the kind of political representation which is in Rousseau’s eyes conceptually necessary and rational is the famous passage in the Social Contract which distinguishes between aggregated private wills (volonté de tous) and the general will (volonté générale):

\[\text{the latter looks only to the common interest, the former looks to private interest, and is nothing but a sum of particular wills; but if, from these same wills, one takes away the pluses and the minuses, which cancel each other out, what is left as the sum of the differences is the general will.}^{46}\]

So, the general will is not an abstract, independent power, above and beyond the individual citizens (as some of Rousseau’s foes argued), but a product of a proper procedure of setting off private wills against each other. Even more interesting for our purpose is Rousseau’s original footnote referring to Marquis d’Argenson’s explanation that the very concept of private interest can be understood only as standing in opposition to other private interests. This brings Rousseau to state that agreement between interests is a product of their opposition, or

If there were no different interests, the common interest would scarcely be sensible since it would never encounter obstacles: every thing would run by itself, and politics would cease to be an art.\(^{47}\)

This is a clear articulation of the idea that absolute transparency does not make sense, that “obstruction” (in Starobinski’s terminology) is constitutive for politics as it is for art and for optics.

Accordingly, Rousseau, following Machiavelli, sees the great threat to well-ordered society not in private wills (since they constitute the general will) but in factions and parties, which as mediators of the public good undermine the expression of the genuine will of individuals. But for this expression of the general will to take form, individuals must be given the proper conditions for rational deliberation, independent of the undesirable

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\(^{46}\) Social Contract, 60.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
effect of factional interests, that is, by having no communication with others. The general will is achieved by this method just because individuals “represent” only themselves, or rather only their true selves—and this is the self that is reflected in independent rational deliberation. Philosophically speaking, the understanding of representation as “nonreflexive” denies the possibility of self-representation; nevertheless, once we adopt Rousseau’s view of the human individual as internally split between the rational and irrational parts, the idea of self-representation makes sense. Not only does it make sense, it is the basis of the constitution of a politically legitimate republic.

And again, the analogue to the arts is compelling. Comedy should never be allowed in Geneva, since “it would serve as an instrument for factions, parties, and private vengeances,” and “would soon degenerate into satires and representations of persons [individuals]” (Letter, 121). On the other hand, the festival is a gathering which is designed “so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united” (126; my emphasis). The common joy of the public games and dances is the counterpart of the public good in politics. In contrast to the ancient dance of the savages in the state of nature, which gave rise to the catastrophic emotion of amour propre, the festival is the place where individuals represent themselves, not through their private interests and emotions, but through their identification with others. They expose their public persona. In the political arena, the rational deliberation in privacy about the public good forms a mirror image of the individual’s complete immersion in the festive communal activity. But they have the same structure: individuals become united by representing themselves as social beings.

Dispensing with Representation, Nevertheless

Rousseau never felt that he overcame the problem of representation. Despite his attempts to distinguish between deceitful, manipulative, and exploitative forms of representation in politics and art, and faithful, legitimate, unifying, and edifying forms, he never gave up the personal struggle for unmediated authenticity. His later life and work demonstrate this desperate effort.

In the first paragraph of Reveries of the Solitary Walker (his last, unfinished work), Rousseau describes the final stage of his life. He is now left “alone on earth,” leading a completely solitary life. His question is “what am I?” and the answer can be given only through unmediated introspection,
with neither political nor artistic intercession.48 These seem to be the ideal conditions for authentic self-examination. Furthermore, they enable him to sense his self-sufficient joy in his own existence, pure contentment which is not mediated by any emotion, the closest to the original, un tarnished *amour de soi*.49 But Rousseau himself admits that these conditions led him to a world of madness, in which the boundaries between wakefulness and sleep, life and death, had become blurred, as did the boundaries between “thoughts” and “reveries,” rational self-reflection and delusion. But since pure self-awareness is unobtainable, Rousseau, even in his solitary existence, must still negotiate with other human beings. This he does through *writing*. The confession, the ultimate act of self-examination, must be conducted through another person, be it a priest or a reader.50 And the self must therefore be in some way represented. Writing puts to use a conventional system of linguistic representation and by that already concedes defeat in the struggle for unmediated presentation. The search for perfect authenticity and complete transparency is futile, and insistence on it proves, for the aging Rousseau, to be an obsessive project of a desperate man. The escape to solipsism leads to the annihilation of the very self which Rousseau, throughout his life was—indeed authentically—seeking.

48 Science, too, is rejected, as being conducted only for the sake of utility. Rousseau chooses to engage in botanical observation (and puts his “findings” in writing in several essays). This is a kind of mental activity which is intentionally chosen for its lack of any emotional dimension. See Christopher Kelly, “Rousseau and the Case against (and for) the Arts,” in *The Legacy of Rousseau* (ed. C. Orwin and N. Tarcov; Chicago, 1997), 36.


50 For the role of the reader in Rousseau’s *Reveries*, see Eli Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau: An Afterlife of Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), Chapters 2 and 6. Friedlander also compares the festival to the general will in terms of “presence” (Chapter 9), but he does not note the limits of transparency in both and the necessary role of the individual in constituting the collective will or aesthetic experience.