

The emergence of theatre and the chorus as ideal audience: A study of indirect and direct interaction with the public in Ancient Greece

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Abstract: Direct interaction between the stage and the audience in European theater, from Antiquity to the present day, is a subject as vast as the cultural, geographical, and temporal scope of the phenomenon. Beyond the aesthetic realm, we sense that theater has had the power, over the centuries, to influence history by disseminating ideas, attitudes, and principles among its audience members to the same extent that it was itself influenced, throughout its evolution, on the one hand by the tastes of the audience, and on the other by the political and religious stakes associated with a particular context. This paper proposes an analysis of the two fundamental types of interaction with the audience—direct and indirect—in the early days of theater. By direct interaction, we mean those moments in the performance when the public becomes an overt participant in the artistic act, as well as the actors’ interventions that clearly address those watching them. Indirect interaction, however, involves influences brought from outside the performance that do not alter its structure as it unfolds. The first part of this article will therefore examine proto-theater, which foreshadows the dramaturgy of Hellenic culture in terms of the forms of interaction characteristic of religious processions. Dionysian festivals, through their communal and celebratory nature, offer a perfect example of interactivity, engaging—and even making it mandatory—the immersion of spectators in the unfolding of events. In Ancient Greece, we can already speak of the establishment of theater and, consequently, of the emergence of the amphitheater, the first space built specifically to optimize the conditions under which a performance could be viewed. The second part of the article will analyze the role of the ancient chorus in the stage-audience interaction, through the lens of its threefold function: “ideal” spectator, sounding board, and gateway.

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Introduction

To trace the evolution of the relationship between theatre creators and the audience, it is advisable to return to the most plausible origins of the dramatic act. Interaction, in this context, refers to the influence that two seemingly different human bodies exert on one another— a dynamic with a theatrical appeal so compelling that it no longer matters which of them initiated the action. The historical record has been depleted over time of certain elements that might help us piece together a completely coherent narrative, but the beauty of the study lies precisely in investigating—at times even at the risk of speculation—territories with uncertain contours or perhaps information that has been misinterpreted until now.

The origins of theatre can be traced back to the array of rituals and communal gatherings in Antiquity—such as harvests, weddings, religious rites, or battles—in which tribal dances and festivals served as occasions for celebration. Early theatrical performances thus had an intrinsic participatory element, as both performers and spectators were involved in the festivities. According to ancient beliefs, the success of such events foreshadowed the community's material well-being: bountiful harvests, victories in war, or the gods' favor. Thus, theatre initially established itself as a pragmatic endeavor, aimed at collective well-being.

By examining the origins of plays attested historically as far back as Ancient Greece, we can chart their lineage as a theatrical tradition that evolved from the aforementioned events and is, at the same time, closely linked to the Dionysian celebrations of the grape harvest and the gods. Spanning several days, these festivals involved the enthusiastic participation of spectators and have endured over time in the folk history of various regions around the globe. These rich cultural legacies reflect the deep-rooted connection between theatre, ritual, and shared spirituality, reminding us of the enduring significance of performance as a means of celebrating and affirming similar human experiences. In this paper, we aim to pay particular attention to the direct and indirect interactions specific to these ritualistic manifestations that preceded or foreshadowed the emergence of comedies and tragedies. By direct interaction, we mean the performer-spectator contact within the event, while indirect interaction refers to

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the social, political, and civic consequences and influences that these nascent manifestations exerted on the public (and vice versa, as a form of interdependence).

In *History of Theatre*, Oscar Brockett (1982, 3) argues that within this cultural Darwinism, viewed as an evolution toward the artistic act, a number of transitional links from ritual to theatre remain unknown. In this regard, a more extensive exploration of the historical and religious context of Hellenic culture would be necessary. These celebrations presuppose, first and foremost, the adoption of a god of Thracian origin. Unlike the classical gods of the Hellenic pantheon, to whom votive offerings and statuettes were dedicated—with access to the ritual being, to some extent, limited to the aristocracy and elites—Dionysus appears as a dual entity of happiness born of suffering. The circumstances of his birth led Dionysus to embody an attitude toward life marked by rebellion, hedonism, ecstatic joy, and a primal communion with nature. We tend to view this god as having emerged primarily as a necessity for the lower classes, as a manifestation of the fascination exerted by the accessibility of contact with a divinity that is earthlier in nature.

Walter Burkert ([1977] 1985) notes that during these processions dedicated to Dionysus, in addition to the consumption of wine, milk, and honey by all participants, leather artefacts representing phalluses were displayed, sacrifices of goats—and later of oxen—took place, and acts during which animals' meat was consumed raw in the midst of the procession. At the same time, the author also invokes a possible presence of cannibalistic fantasy:

[...] the Agrionia festival in the Dorian and Aeolic area, which is a festival of dissolution and inversion, with a women's uprising, madness, and cannibalistic fantasies; the rustic Dionysia with goat sacrifices and a phallos procession (Burkert 1985, 163).

For Nietzsche ([1872] 1978), the satyr manifests the split between the cognitive, rational realm—as a cultural phenomenon—and the primordial realm of ecstasy in the presence of the divine. In the satyr, the ancient Greek, the Dionysian man, found a path to nature, in all its power and wisdom, and, through nature, to the primordial essence of the divine:

The satyr, like the idyllic shepherd in more recent literature, is the fruit of a yearning for naturalness and spontaneity. [...] Nature untouched by knowledge, where the gates of civilization had not yet been opened—this is

what the Greeks saw in their satyr [...] On the contrary, the satyr was the primordial image of man, the expression of his highest and most powerful emotions, as befitted those of an exalted being delighted by the god's approach. He was the companion in whom the god's suffering was reflected, the herald of wisdom from the depths of nature, the symbol of nature's sexual omnipotence, which the Greek was accustomed to regard with awe and veneration. The satyr was a sublime, divine being; this is how he must have appeared, especially to the weary and sorrowful gaze of the Dionysian man. [...] He felt a sublime delight in contemplating, unveiled and authentic, the grandiose features of nature; here the illusion of culture had been erased from the primordial image of man, here the true man was revealed, the bearded satyr who called out to his god in a delirious frenzy (Nietzsche 1978, 210).

As a hybrid form of expression that shifted between moments of dramatic tension and comic touches, the processions evoked emotional swings from one extreme to the other. We can engage in an exercise of imagination and visualize the spectacular nature of these events, in which the tragic and the comic coexisted in alternation, lifting and lowering the primal spirit in a carousel of existential essence. Later, with the emergence of amphitheatres specifically designed for the consumption of these events, a chasm appeared between the performers and the audience, intended to re-establish the means of belonging, through which dramatic genres could be distinguished and separated as distinct artistic forms, including in terms of direct and indirect interactions.

These developments occurred during a period when social class distinctions were more pronounced. The ecstatic state, bordering on madness, was achieved through the participation of spectators drawn in by performers portraying satyrs and bacchantes clad in furs, masks, and hoof-like footwear. This atmosphere thus created a spiritual transition from the earthly realm to the divine plane. By participating and accepting entry into this ritual convention as a direct interaction, the spectators gained the satisfaction of belonging to a state of freedom specific to that festival, one not found in any other context.

The same mechanisms of audience attraction and inclusion could later be observed at carnival-style events, where performers paraded through the city offering brief snippets of their shows, showcasing the exotic animals and unusual human beings featured in their program, while also integrating spectators into this mobile spectacle, on which occasion some of them could ride elephants, play with monkeys, parrots, etc. It is important to note the way in which the spectacle contaminates the crowd, conquers it, and makes it an accomplice.

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Returning to the Dionysian events, the procession, on its route, would stop at the foot of a hill; the spectators would sit on the slope for a better view and watch a chorus of fifteen boys and girls perform (Zamfirescu 2001, 28). The early improvisations focused on topics related to the god's life and adventures in a laudatory and descriptive manner, but the verse later evolved to gradually include references to events in the life of the city:

The truth, however, is that it was not only processions of drunken satyrs or merry Silenus who gathered around Dionysus, but also concerns of a deeper nature, regarding the city's circumstances, its relations with other cities, as well as the workings of the human soul (Zamfirescu 2001, 29).

Here, under the banner of reciprocity—as a form of indirect interaction—we observe a progression of the artistic-religious act toward contemporary issues and topics of immediate interest to the participants.

The organizational structure of theatrical performances under the influence of Athenian democracy

With the transition from Dionysian processions—a pre-theatrical form that engaged spectators in collective communication with nature and, through it, with the divine—to the confinement of the theatrical act within the amphitheatre's epicentre, a change in space occurs and, consequently, a change in the fundamental relationship with the spectator, whose participation, in this second form, loses its festive immersiveness and shifts toward the role of an external observer. Through the existence of a stage—that is, a predefined space for the performance of the theatrical act—and of seats reserved for spectators, which in itself nullifies the peripatetic, profoundly mobile dimension of the processions of yesteryear, the distance between actor and spectator becomes palpable, becomes spatialized, yet gives way to other forms of interaction.

A close connection can be observed between democracy (as both a political and spiritual concept) and new forms of spectacle. First of all, amphitheatres were built to accommodate as many spectators as possible. Indirectly, selection was made by offering the best seats to citizens—those considered capable and entitled to express their views in the agora—while women, foreigners, and slaves occupied the seats in the back. *Theatron* originally referred to the wooden benches on which spectators sat, but over time it became synonymous with the

audience. It is interesting how the evolution of the term came to define an art form, once again highlighting the interdependence of actor-space-spectator—an interdependence strongly emphasized by Peter Brook ([1968] 2014, 17).

It is important to note that only men were selected as actors and women were excluded from the cast. At the same time, the responsibility to perform artistically went hand in hand with the status of model citizen. Performers were required to demonstrate perfect physical condition and be capable of peak artistic performance, with strict moral conduct imposed upon them; those caught stealing or involved in scandals were punished as an example. In the spirit of equal opportunity, roles were assigned by lottery. The same selection method applied to the ten members of the jury, which suggests that, in the long term, all citizens were expected to participate in all performances, so that their votes for the winning theatralogy would be well-reasoned.

This commitment to equal opportunity was also reflected in a special fund set aside for those who could not afford to pay for their admission; citizens were encouraged to cover the cost of admission for slaves and women out of their own pockets. This type of civic attitude is an expression of the indirect interaction between the performances' aim to educate the audience and the audience's desire to be educated. Against the backdrop of this reciprocity, the concept of *hybris* aims to at least mimic a balance among community members. In Greek mythology, the goddess Nemesis, who would later become Blind Justice with a sword in one hand and scales in the other, was meant to give to those who have nothing and to take away from the excess of others, as an intrinsic moral; she trained the human spirit not to covet more and not to treat the inferior with arrogance. It is important to note that in those times the Greeks did not know the term "mythology". In their view, Homer's writings were chronicles from other times; the very concept of "history" was not even part of their vocabulary until Herodotus' famous work. We are talking about a rapidly expanding civilization which, under the influence of these factors, would undergo accelerated and coherent cultural development.

The chorus as ideal spectator

In his lectures on dramatic art and literature, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel ([1809-1811] 1965) sees the chorus as the ideal representation of the audience. His well-known assertion is initially justified on a

spatial level, as the German poet identifies the very placement of the chorus as an essential epicentre for understanding a form of intersubjectivity between the chorus and the audience. The chorus is thus assigned two spaces: below the stage level, in the orchestra pit, the site of movement and choral singing, and in front of the orchestra, opposite the centre of the stage, on an altar-like platform at the same height as the stage, called the *Thymele*, where the chorus was positioned when not singing, but merely watched the unfolding of the action, like an interested spectator. Schlegel considers the spatial centrality of the chorus, of the *Thymele*, sufficient to regard it as an ideal location, relative to which the measurements of the space were made, and around which the amphitheatre was arranged in its semicircle: „It was, therefore, an excellent contrivance to place the chorus, who were the ideal representatives of the spectators, in the very spot where all the radii converged.” (Schlegel 1965, 58)

In terms of representativeness, Schlegel unequivocally views the chorus as the ideal spectator, and at the same time as the personified reflection of the dramatic action, and at certain points as a projection of the poet's feelings, in its capacity as the voice of all humanity. As the ideal spectator, the chorus mediates the emotional plane circumscribed within the narrative, mirroring to the spectator a lyrical and musical expression of their own emotions and thus allowing them to ascend to a contemplative plane. We thus find, under the umbrella of an idealized form of representation, the threads of indirect interaction, as we defined it at the beginning of this paper. Regarding comedy, Schlegel highlights the functionality of direct interaction as a form of chaotic exuberance, in the sense that allusive references, in a comic register, to a proximate reality allow the poet, embodied through the chorus, to engage in dialogue with the audience in a certain way and, moreover, to “point the finger” at individual spectators.

The chorus thus becomes essential to the ecosystem of comedy not only because it represents, to a certain extent, the audience, but also because it embodies a festive joy whose unrestrained expression is comedy—we are referring here to the religious and national festivals of ancient Greece, during which choral singing and dancing took place. Here, the comedy chorus becomes the expression of public joy. The *parabasis*, understood as the chorus addressing the audience directly, in the name of—or, rather, as a representative of—the poet, without having a direct connection to the play's subject (the exaggeration of certain merits, the ridicule of rivals, the assertion of Athenian

citizenship, etc.), is, strictly speaking, incongruous with the essence of dramatic performance; however, in the realm of comedy, intentional interruptions and interludes that disrupt the dramatic atmosphere are welcome.

As mentioned, in his study on the birth of tragedy, Nietzsche sees in the satyr the primordial image of the Dionysian man, in his natural, Bacchic, sexual exaltation as a form of communion with the divine. The chorus of satyrs allows for the same exuberance of people identifying with the spirits of nature, of finding themselves, through metamorphosis, in the ecstatic jubilation of the Dionysian crowd. In an ideational dialogue with Schlegel, the German philosopher describes the tragic chorus as an artistic imitation of the phenomenon of self-representation explained above:

Yet we must not forget for a moment that the audience of ancient tragedy identified with the chorus; that, in fact, there was no distinction between the audience and the chorus; for the whole was nothing more than a grand chorus of satyrs singing and dancing, or of people allowing themselves to be represented by these satyrs. Schlegel's statement takes on a deeper meaning here. The chorus is the ideal spectator in that it is the sole observer, the one who sees the world of the stage. An audience of spectators like that of today was unknown to the Greeks; in their theatres, thanks to the rows rising in concentric arcs, it was easy for everyone to abstract themselves from the entire world of culture around them and, in the intoxication of contemplation, to feel themselves to be a chorister. (Nietzsche 1978, 211)

The chorus, which Schlegel viewed as the ideal spectator, is perceived by Nietzsche in terms of unintended functionality—as the ecstatic surrender of the ancient Greek audience to otherness.

Building on Schlegel's famous assertion regarding the chorus of Greek tragedy as an idealized spectator, Claude Calame analyzes the performative function of the choral voice, relating it to a form of civic identity for which the chorus serves as an interface. In the article 'Performative aspects of the choral voice in Greek tragedy: Civic identity in performance' (1999), Calame perceives, following Schlegel, a nuanced duality in the chorus: on the one hand, it conveys the tension generated by the dramatic action while simultaneously mitigating its impact; on the other hand, it represents not only humanity as a whole, but specifically the poet and his thoughts, serving as a voice for both the ideal spectator and the author of the tragedy.

It is worth noting here that the same idea of the chorus mitigating dramatic impact is also found in Schiller's remarks on the same

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subject. Schiller ([1803] 1993) believes that, while the chorus enlivens the dialogue, it calms the action, acting as a protective shield for the audience, which must retain its freedom of thought even in the face of the most powerful passions. The author thus speaks of a necessary detachment of the audience's emotions, a detachment maintained by the chorus, which, like a protective barrier, establishes itself as a frontline audience capable of bearing the brunt of the tragedy:

If the blows with which tragedy strikes our heart were to follow one another without interruption, suffering would vanquish activity. We would be immersed in the material, and no longer hover over it. By holding the parts apart, and stepping between the passions with its calming reflection, it restores our freedom to us, which would be lost in the storm of affects. (Schiller 1993, pp. 63-64)

Seeing, therefore, in detachment and, ultimately, in the preservation of a rational attitude, a form of freedom for the audience, Schiller is tempted to find in the accusations levelled against the chorus—that it nullifies the illusion, that it interrupts the force of emotions—precisely what recommends it, since, in the playwright's view, the whirlwind of emotions blinds. Another function of the chorus, in the view of the same philosopher, is, as noted above, that of observation; the choristers are witnesses situated between the artist and the empirical audience, facilitating a sort of sanctuary for the former, who listens to it, who takes on its passion, who motivates its state of mind:

They stand, to a degree, upon a natural theatre, because they speak and act in front of observers, and they will therefore speak all the more fittingly from the artificial theatre to its audience.” (Ibidem)

Returning to Calame's article, we find three complementary dimensions of the choral voice highlighted, all closely linked to the performative act: a ritual dimension, as a form of interaction between the choir members and the action, as well as the actors performing it on stage, through which the former exert a practical influence on the development of the action; a hermeneutic dimension, at the level of which the choir members partially assume a gnomonic function while also providing additional information that the theatrical act does not reveal (events preceding the presented action, the delineation of space, comments on the action itself); an affective dimension by virtue of which the chorus members express the emotions evoked by the stage action and, at which level, the chorus is entrusted, according to

Aristotle, with the emotions that the audience should feel (as a form of *catharsis*):

The emotional aspect of the voice of the community in the chorus members returns us to the spectators: by the way of the dramatic performance the reactions of the ideal spectator, [...] would induce similar reactions in the actual public which has come together in the theatre to honour Dionysus Eleuthereus. (Calame 1999, 129)

In addition to the three functional axes highlighted above, Calame reiterates the forms of representationality articulated through pronouns—specifically the “I,” “you,” “we,” and “you all” of choral speech—thereby positing the hypothesis that the audience is immersed in the dramatic performance. The author sees, beyond a few indirect addresses, an invitation extended to the audience through the chorus to assume the choral “I,” by virtue of which the audience, through a process of identification, is called upon to address the actors or the gods through the thoughts and feelings of the chorus—a development all the more likely given that the Athenian spectator had previously received an education in choral activity:

By the way of the I/we of the choral speaker in tragedy, the spectators who take part in a festivity in honour of Dionysus in the theatre in some way delegate part of their choral competence and authority to the chorus which is at the heart of the dramatic representation. (Calame 1999, 149)

Thus, at the level of the choral ode’s performative dimension, interwoven with its emotional dimension, the audience is invited to interact with the dramatic action from the perspective of that choral “I”/“we”—a transubstantiation that results in the projection of reality onto dramatic fiction. The use of the first person (singular/plural) within the choral performance, in its full ritual and collective capacity, allows for the immersion into the dramatic text of the extra-discursive reality represented by the civic community present in the space that has become the sanctuary of the theatre. The polymorphism and polyphony of the tragic chorus, particularly as a masked production, result in a form of referentiality for the audience under the tutelage of “you,” to whom the drama is addressed and who are permitted to assume the choral persona of “we,” without distinction based on social status or gender. Thus, catharsis is created as a form of reflexive distancing, in the sense that the audience’s emotions are assumed by the masked choristers, at the level of an affective collaboration achieved through the audience’s participation via the chorus. According to Calame, we

can no longer speak of communication in the true sense of the word, but rather of a form of intersubjectivity. Due to the performative function of the choral voice—at the level where the hermeneutic and affective dimensions of tragic song intersect—the audience is called upon to assume not the passive role of the ideal spectator, but rather an active position alongside the virtual author.

In the moments when the chorus directs its discourse toward the characters on stage, acting as a representative of the ideal audience, we consider that we are dealing with a process of indirect interaction. The chorus thus shifts the focus to the emotional collective of the spectators, sparking a dialogue between the emotion and reason of those witnessing the major events presented in the performance. In contrast, when, under the influence of the aforementioned “self,” the chorus addresses the *Theatron* (now in the sense of the auditorium), it becomes a direct interaction, as it manifests as an active recommendation of what one should understand and what one should feel.

The importance of the chorus gradually declined as the Dionysian festivals evolved and, it seems, in tandem with the developments pioneered by Aeschylus—namely, the introduction of a second actor—followed by Sophocles, who developed the concept of scenery, and Euripides, an innovator at least in his use of the *Deus ex machina* technique. One of the chorus’ responsibilities was to clarify for the audience the what, where, and when of the events to be presented on stage. In the early days of theatre, this function served as an indirect yet necessary bridge connecting a vast crowd of people of unequal status, whose knowledge of the stories about Greek gods and heroes was also uneven. The chorus, as a physical presence, was marked by neutrality—masks and garments that erased individual identity, so that it could stand in for anyone in the *Theatron*.

Thus, acting as a correspondent within the theatrical space, the chorus—a collective character—behaves like an experienced spectator who possesses the generosity to bring everyone to a common ground, namely to facilitate the understanding of the theatrical context as a stage of empathetic absorption. Being unfamiliar with the subject of a tragedy delays the cathartic effect, and this requires special focus in order to capture the attention of all 14,000 people in the Amphitheatre of Dionysus. As the performance unfolds and the audience gains the ability to grasp the subject and context of the tragedies more quickly, this “program guide” responsibility of the chorus diminishes to make

way for a dynamic conflict between the major characters and the unfolding of the action. The positioning of the chorus in the orchestra, on the same level as the front row of spectators, nevertheless leaves the impression that there is no barrier between the actors and the rest of the audience:

The unit of place, as we understand it in the Aristotelian conception, is an exemplary spatial concentration. This requirement is justified not so much by aesthetic considerations as by practical reasons: a spectator can engage with a story—both rationally and emotionally—only if its spatial boundaries are confined to a single location. (Saiu 2008, 16)

Thus, all gazes directed toward the stage inevitably pass through the filter of a chorus that acts as a magnifying glass, distorting perception, like an organic bridge between almost unreal events and the “civil” condition of those present at the event. In the early forms of tragic theatre, a chorus of satyrs would have constantly reminded the audience of the chasm between the real and the imaginary; this chorus underwent a transformation toward a shared human identity, in order to heighten empathy and catharsis, thereby “civilizing” the artistic product. Through this representative positioned in front of the stage, the audience feels that the events belong to them to a greater extent, and this transformation occurred as an indirect interaction, for, after all, theatre cannot evolve independently of the spectator’s needs.

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