Dear readers,

The purpose of my paper is to compare the arguments in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Letter to M. D’Alembert* and Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* in regards to the emotion and vulnerability seen in Kiarostami’s film *Shirin.* My motivating question stems from the intensity and origination of emotions in the women, observed in the last scene of the movie. What triggers certain emotions to be brought forth, and why do some women display little emotional response while others are much more vivid? What is the meaning behind these emotions, and how does this relate to the role of emotions in theater in general? One of the main points I cover is the idea of spectators taking from the performance and giving part of themselves to make them vulnerable to emotion. I also touch very briefly on gender roles and the contradiction between which sex plays which role in the theater. I used some of Rousseau’s arguments regarding to love to further emphasize his arguments on emotion. However, I did find a few contradictions in Rousseau’s argument and I tried to highlight those and question them. Rancière had more of a streamlined argument, so I continued to apply his arguments to the different ideas that Rousseau presents.

The biggest problem I had was finding ways to add dimensions to my thesis and trying to interpret passages in interesting ways that would contribute to my thesis. While I found many different arguments from Rousseau, sometimes I had trouble interpreting each passage in a way that would be useful or relevant to the point I was trying to make. Also, because interpretations are so open and individual, my interpretations may not have come across as clearly to readers who may have interpreted the passage in a different way.

I feel much more confident in my thesis and my motivation for the essay than I did in my first draft, and I think the point I made most successfully still lies in the first body paragraph of my essay, in which I discuss Rousseau’s idea of only taking from the theater and that emotion heightens from not having to sacrifice any part of ourselves as audience members. This was the most notable and interesting passage that I found when I read through the text the first time, and I could directly contrast this passage with Rancière’s argument and connect it with *Shirin*.

The question I would like to ask my readers plays in with my introduction. I hoped to structure my introduction by providing one source of my motivating question, and to not quite directly state my thesis in the introduction in order for the paper to develop. I am not sure, however, that the structure reads and is as successful as I would like it to be.

If I were to start revising, I would hope to improve my conclusion, for I struggled between ending on a very general note while still explaining the result of my analysis. Also, I would continue to make sure my writing transitions and flows well from paragraph to paragraph, and that

Thank you,

Dee Luo

Dee Luo

Professor Johnston

Image and Imagination

9 November 2012

The Source of Emotions in the Theater

The women shown in Kiarostami’s film *Shirin* are taken on a journey while watching an unnamed film following the tragic love of Shirin and Khosrow. While their facial expressions and emotions seem to only change slightly through most scenes of the film, there are a few prominent scenes where the women are seen weeping, vulnerable to the scene in front of them. For example, in the last scene of the film the women are seen mourning over the tragic ending and suicide of Shirin’s life (Kiarostami 84:20-89:55). Jean Jacques Rousseau argues in his *Letter to M. D’Alembert* that theater is a one-way transfer between audience and performers. He writes, “… the heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real ones, if theatrical imitations draw forth more ears than would the presence of the objects imitated, it is less because the emotions are feebler… than because they are pure and without mixture of anxiety for ourselves” (Rousseau 25). Rousseau suggests that spectators feel emotions much more strongly when watching theater because they have no personal anxieties that inhibit their ability to truly feel emotions. However, Rancière proposes more of an exchange and two-sided relationship between spectators and actors. Thus, emotions are derived from individual interpretations of what is being presented. Using these two philosophers contrasting arguments, we can analyze the questionable quality of and authenticity of the emotions of the women in *Shirin* and how they are brought forth.

Rousseau believes that vulnerability is created in the theater through the audience’s ability to receive ideas and emotions without contributing any individualistic thoughts, as well as the idea of relief from personal anxieties. He argues, “In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves…” (Rousseau 25). This argument contributes to one of his overarching problems with theater in that spectators are completely passive while at the theater. He describes that in reality, “our heart closes itself for fear of being touched at our expense,” and that “unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work…” (Rousseau 25). According to Rousseau, only when we have no risk of sacrificing ourselves are our emotions pure. For example, if we experience a death of a friend, we do not feel grief to its purest extent because we must deal with personal inconveniences. In the context of *Shirin,* according to Rousseau the women are crying because they have momentarily forgotten themselves and are merely taking from the performance. For example, when Khosrow leaves Shirin and marries another woman, and Shirin finds her aunt at the edge of death, Rousseau would argue that the women in the audience were crying purely from absorbing the emotion in Shirin’s tragedy (41:25-46:30). They are able to cry so freely because they have no inner conflicts that prevent them from showing complete emotion.

Rancière, on the other hand, would interpret that the women are being emotional because they are exposing themselves and their own individual ideas. The audience is not simply taking from the performance, but the spectators are interpreting the performance using their own unique thoughts. They are giving themselves to the ideas of the play. Rancière writes, “The spectator… observes, selects, compares, interprets” (Rancière 13). In the same Shirin example, Rancière would say that each woman is connecting the tragic events with something in their own personal lives; each connection would be different, and essentially each emotion would stem from a different cause that was extended upon from the scene in the movie. Rancière describes a more mutually active relationship in his argument by suggesting that the spectator must “link what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place” (Rancière 13). Contrasting with Rousseau’s passivity argument, Rancière’s audience plays an active role, and thus emotion is created through each spectator’s running thoughts. Vulnerability according to Rancière would be the idea that the spectators are not only taking the ideas of the play, but also giving their own individual interpretations and letting the play personally affect them.

It is interesting to note also when the women watching the film make some sort of movement outside just changing their facial expression and how these movements can be interpreted. At 45:44 in Kiarostami, the woman, who has tears brimming in her eyes, looks down briefly, almost disengaging herself from the movie she is watching. Using Rousseau, we would interpret this woman as like a blank slate to be filled with the ideas that she takes from the theater. One interpretation is that she has become so overwhelmed by all the pure emotion that she removes herself momentarily from absorbing all the feelings and energies from the movie. On the other hand, if we consider that she is receiving what the filmmaker is presenting her and turning it into something of her own in her mind as Rancière would discuss, we can suggest that she has become so immersed in her own construction that she looks away from the film to fully grasp the ideas she is putting together in her head. Depending on whether we analyze the women using Rancière or Rousseau’s arguments, we find that the women are experiencing vulnerability by either absorbing the feelings that are projected through the story, or by connecting the feelings with past experiences and knowledge, which thus creates emotion.

However, one noted contradiction between Rousseau’s argument in relation to emotion and the concept of *Shirin* is the issue of gender roles. When we look at the audience in Shirin, we are only focused on the women’s faces. It is not that men are not in the theater; in fact, at many points we can see men in the row behind the focused woman, sometimes even appearing to accompany a female. At 87:50, perhaps one of the most emotional scenes of the film, when Shirin concludes her tragedy prior to her suicide, we are shown a woman with tears streaming down her face. If we look behind her to the right, we see a man with no emotion written on his face whatsoever. Historically, it has been stereotypically portrayed by media, literature, and art that women are the more vulnerable sex and are much more emotional, while men are the more powerful sex with control over women. Rousseau argues that this stereotype is reversed when connected with love. He believes it is the presupposed “order of nature” for women to have more power to resist men, and this power can be extended to the realms of the theater. He writes, “…Hence, a natural effect of this sort of play is to extend the empire of the fair sex, to make women and girls the preceptors of the public, and to give them the same power over the audience that they have over their lovers” (Rousseau 47). Rousseau claims that “love is the realm of women” (Rousseau 47), and thus by placing female characters in theatrical stories of love and knowledge, theater would give women power, leaving the men vulnerable. This creates a parallel between women and the actors on stage, and men and spectators. Men in the audience mold to the women on stage, losing their masculine power and society’s view of gender roles. Kiarostami’s work seems to contradict with Rousseau, however, in that the women are being taken in completely by the emotion of the play, while the men seem hardly affected, if at all. Even though the main plot of the movie circulates around a female figure and her love story, the females rather than the men are the ones who find their emotions at liberty to the performance.

While Rancière does not explicitly make a statement about gender roles, he constantly refers to the role of the spectator as “she” and the director as “he”. For example, when explaining the role of the spectator he states, “She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way” (Rousseau 13). In laying out his argument as explained previously that the spectator translates the ideas of the theater individualistically through previous experience and unique connection, Rancière refers to the spectator as a female. She is the one who actively interprets what he presents through her own inimitable knowledge. This corresponds to Kiarostami’s choice in portraying women as the center audience members in the theater who are affected, as opposed to the men.

Rousseau makes yet another interesting point regarding emotion and vulnerability, specifically in love. He states, “The harm for which the theater is reproached is not precisely that of inspiring criminal passions but of disposing the soul to feelings which are too tender and which are later satisfied at the expense of virtue” (Rousseau 51). He argues here that theater gives spectators a false sense of emotion, such as in love, because the emotions presented are “not in themselves a definite object, but they produce the need for one. They do not precisely cause love, but they prepare the way for its being experienced” (Rousseau 51). In reality, these women are experiencing a false state of emotion that causes them to have an expectation for their own lives. Here, a contradiction can be noted with what Rousseau stated earlier regarding how spectators are able to feel pure emotion because they have no anxieties or worries about themselves. Now he claims that these emotions are actually false in a way because they are more so expectations of emotion born from the performance rather than personal emotions originating from the spectator. Although Rousseau’s argument here was originally intended for love, we can interpret his argument in the context of the crying women in the audience of *Shirin*. Using Rousseau’s logic we can conclude that the women are so enthralled by Shirin and Khosrow’s destined and fatal love that they will be left with an unfulfilled hope for a passion as dramatic as theirs. Another contradiction can be noted when Rousseau continues on this point, writing, “…[The sweet emotions] do not choose the person who ought to be loved, but they force us to make this choice. Thus, they are innocent or criminal only from the use that we make of them according to our character, and this character is independent of the example” (Rousseau 51). His argument here reads that the emotions presented to the spectators are left to the “choice” of the spectator based on the character of the spectator, and that every spectator’s character is individual, and thus “independent of the example.” This contradicts his previous argument that emotions are a direct transfer from stage to audience.

This argument can thus be interpreted in a way that parallels Rancière’s thesis. Rancière uses the model of the ignorant schoolmaster as his opposition that he counters. In this model, he explains that the pupil learns what the schoolmaster intends for her to learn without considering what the pupil already knows. In parallel the spectator sees and feels what the director intends for her to see and feel. He states that with this model, “The playwright or director would like the spectators to see this and feel that, understand some particular thing and draw some particular conclusion” (Rancière 14). This shallow set of emotion is similar to what Rousseau explains in his previous argument. It does not actually lead to a personal connection; rather it is a transfer of emotions from theater to audience. Rancière counters this point by writing, “…artists do not wish to instruct the spectator. Today, they deny using the stage to dictate a lesson or convey a message. They simply wish to produce a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action” (Rancière 14). The spectator determines the interpretation and choice on how the scene is viewed. In context of the emotional women in *Shirin*, Rancière would argue that the film sets a certain energy, and the way the women interpret the tragedy using their own experiences creates the feelings. This would explain why some women are seen with only tears brimming at their eyes while others have a flow of tears streaming down their cheeks.

Even though the women in *Shirin* are watching a tragedy, there are still many scenes in which the film has a feeling of joy and happiness, and we can see slight smiles on the women’s faces. Rousseau states that this range of emotions is nothing new to the passions that the spectators are already familiar with. He argues that the playwrights plan out a passion that we are already inclined to like in order for the play to succeed. He writes, “The stage is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But if the painter neglected to flatter these passions, the spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themselves in a light which made them despise themselves” (Rousseau 18). This leads to a play that simply instills in us passions that have already existed. Rancière would take this a step further and explain that while the playwright is setting up what he think will stir up the most emotion and reaction from the audience, each spectator will interpret the scenes in a different way. There is a distance between the playwright and the audience, but in order for the play to be successful, a bridge needs to be built between the two so that spectator takes what the playwright gives her in a way that is unique and new to the society.

In Kiarostami’s film *Shirin,* the women in the audience display a range of emotions, mostly in the form of sadness when viewing the tragedy. The intensity of emotions of each individual woman varies, and the viewer may question how these emotions are instigated among the different women. When analyzing how these emotions are brought forth, Rancière and Rousseau have contrasting arguments regarding passions and the roles of the spectator in bringing forth passion. Rancière writes, “It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other” (Rancière 17). He argues that spectators receive what is presented before them, and they make connections to their past experiences and ideas. Therefore, some emotions stem from a certain connection or thought that each individual spectator has. Rousseau has a very different argument, claiming that it is more of an emotion transfer so to say, and that we experience emotions to a certain level because we do not have to sacrifice any part of ourselves to what is being shown to us. Furthermore, Rousseau suggests that the emotions developed in the theater are simply old emotions being reused, while Rancière would argue that each emotion is a new interpretation or connection that is unique and has not been made before. The contrast between Rancière and Rousseau’s arguments provide multiple possibilities to the origin of emotion in the theater, and it is left to the viewer to interpret the quality and causes of the emotions being portrayed.

Works Cited

*My Sweet Shirin*. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. Perf. Niki Karimi, Golshifteh Farahani and Juliette Binoche. 2008. Online.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Gregory Elliot. London: Verso, 2009. Print.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre*. Allan Bloom. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. Print.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.