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**« Codifying the Passions in the Classical Age:  
a few reflections on Charles Le Brun's scheme and  
its influence in France and in England »<sup>1</sup>**

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Offering a theoretical basis for the pictorial representation of the passions, Charles Le Brun's *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* is one of the most emblematic projects of French classicism. The lecture was given in 1668 in front of the *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* – the powerful Parisian institution which, under the aegis of Colbert, controlled the world of art – and only appeared in print a few years later when disciples of the master decided to publish it<sup>2</sup>. The context was that of the wider movement towards political centralisation and rationalisation which concerned all aspects of life, including literature and the arts<sup>3</sup>. Le Brun (1619-1690) was then a respected and influential master as well as a Rector of the *Académie*<sup>4</sup> and "the King's First Painter". The lecture offers a

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally read at the *Episteme* seminar at the University of Paris 3 in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> It was published posthumously in three different versions, varying in length and in the quality and quantity of illustrative sketches, by three attendants of the lecture: Henry Testelin (*Sentiments des plus habiles peintres sur la pratique de la peinture et de la sculpture mis en tables de préceptes*, Paris, 1680, 1696), Gaëtan Picard (*Conférence de M. Le Brun sur l'expression générale et particulière*, Paris, 1698), Jean Audran (*Expressions des passions de l'âme, représentées en plusieurs têtes gravées d'après les dessins de feu M. Le Brun*, Paris, 1727). The fullest version of the lecture (Picard's) was edited most recently both by Jennifer Montagu in *The Expression of the Passions. The Origins and Influence of Charles Le Brun's Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994), and by Julien Philippe as *L'Expression des Passions* (Paris, éditions Dédale, 1994). All the Le Brun quotations in this paper are borrowed from the latter.

<sup>3</sup> See Tony Gheeraert, "La Catharsis impensable. La purgation des passions au théâtre et sa remise en cause par les moralistes augutiniens au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle", below, for an analysis of the reformation of the theatre.

<sup>4</sup> He only became the Director of the *Académie* in 1683, after being "Recteur" from 1661, then from 1668 Chancellor, contrary to claims by recent critics. Cf Alan McKenzie, "'The Countenance you show me:' Reading the Passions in the Eighteenth Century", *The Georgia Review*, 32, 1978, p. 762; corrected in his introduction to a reprint of Le Brun, *A Method to*

description with numerous sketches presented as models for painters to represent the passions of the soul by adequate facial expressions. In its own way, and for the way it was received, it offers a fascinating insight into the comprehensive scheme of French rationalism. For if painters, theorists or rhetoricians before Le Brun had naturally concerned themselves with the issue of representing the passions<sup>5</sup>, never had the enterprise been so systematic and comprehensive in scope. Even though it was generally to be dismissed as excessive and rigid in the eighteenth century, more vigorously so in England than in France, its influence in these two countries was profound and enduring. It has thus often been seen as a major source for the visual rhetoric that eventually led to the pathetic style in the arts, in the theatre and even, to a certain extent, in the fiction of the Neo-classical age<sup>6</sup>. This paper examines some aspects of Le Brun's scheme and of the way in which it was received in France and in England.

### I. A semiotic of passions.

Le Brun's project was deeply influenced by Descartes' doctrine of the passions: with his influential mechanistic treatise on the passions<sup>7</sup>, *Les Passions de l'âme*, the French philosopher had broken new ground by showing that the passions – seen all as equally *good* because they served the conservation of life – were first and foremost based on a mechanism

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*learn to design the Passions* (Los Angeles, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California Press, 1980), p. iii. Le Brun had also been the Director of the famous royal *Manufacture des Gobelins* since 1663, and was at the origin of the creation of the *Ecole Française de Rome* – which still to this day grants generous allowances to its laureates. From 1669 to 1683 (which was the year of Colbert's death and the beginning of Le Brun's disgrace in the eyes of the King), Le Brun worked actively on the decoration of Versailles Palace, in particular of the *Grande Galerie*. He liked to see himself as a follower of his prestigious elder, Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and practised the noble genre of history painting.

<sup>5</sup> Quintilian gives elaborate instructions on the attitudes and expressions to be used in order to move an audience (*De Institutione Oratoria*, book XI, iii, 61-135); Leonardo himself briefly described the way the face is distorted under a strong emotion (*Traité de la Peinture*, ed. André Chastel, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1987, 250). *The Treatise of Painting* was available through Fréart de Chambray's French translation published in 1651, or in Italian. For the most complete synthesis on this subject, see Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions*, *op. cit.*, especially p. 1-30.

<sup>6</sup> For an overlook of the pathetic style, see Brewster Rogerson, "The Art of Painting the Passions", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14, 1953, p. 68-93, Alastair Smart, "Dramatic Gesture and Expression in the Age of Hogarth and Reynolds", *Apollo*, 82, 1965, p. 90-97 and Alan McKenzie, "'The Countenance You Show Me': Reading the Passions in the Eighteenth Century", *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Les Passions de l'âme*, Paris, 1649.

revealing the close articulation between body and soul. In the first section of the lecture, which posits the principles of a mechanical conception of the passions – while the second, more practical, deals with the description of the several passions, with the illustrative sketches –, Le Brun implicitly shows his debt to Descartes through verbal echoes, for instance in the importance he attributes to admiration<sup>8</sup> – the definition of which he borrows entirely from the philosopher – or in the order of the passions, from the six simple ones to the composite ones (twenty four in all). Yet he presents more conventional elements as well, such as the traditional hierarchy between the rational and sensitive parts of the soul (or between soul and body), which Descartes had subtly redefined as a conflict between the will and the animal spirits, or more exactly between two contradictory movements created simultaneously in the pineal gland – itself seen as the seat of the connection between soul and body<sup>9</sup>. Le Brun needed this mechanistic theory to bolster up his claim to be expanding a perfectly universal system of categories, valid for every human being: if passions all depended on a psycho-physiological mechanism, then it was easily applicable to all "animal machines"<sup>10</sup>. Besides, by deriving from Descartes the location of the seat of passions in the pineal gland – and not in the heart as was traditional since the Ancients – he could justify his focus on the sole facial expression by the physical proximity of the face with the seat of emotions:

[P]our moi, c'est mon opinion que l'âme reçoit les impressions des passions dans le cerveau, et qu'elle en ressent les effets dans le coeur (...). (p. 54-55)  
[S]'il est vrai qu'il y ait une partie où l'âme exerce plus immédiatement ses fonctions, et que cette partie soit celle du cerveau, nous pouvons dire de même que le visage est la partie du corps où elle fait voir plus particulièrement ce qu'elle ressent. (p. 60)

But he also went one step further by seeing in the eyebrows the most sensitive part of the face<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For Descartes, admiration, which he places at the very origin of thought, is the most noble of passions, because it has no physical effect on the body – it does not induce any alteration in the heart (cf *Les Passions de l'âme*, articles 70, 73, 54 and 55). Note that a typology of the passions was a commonplace of faculty psychology as well as of traditional rhetorics.

<sup>9</sup> Thus when scared by a lion, one tends to flee; but through the intervention of the will, suggesting contrary representations of courage to one's mind, it is possible to correct one's first reaction (*Les Passions de l'âme*, articles 35-36).

<sup>10</sup> Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), section V.

<sup>11</sup> "comme nous avons dit que la glande qui est au milieu du cerveau est le lieu où l'âme reçoit les images des passions, le sourcil est la partie de tout le visage où les passions se font mieux connaître" (p. 60-61). Quintilian had said exactly the same thing, although he had not justified it by the closeness of eyebrows to the mind (*op. cit.*).

In his *Conférence*, Le Brun defined a universally decipherable code, for, he claimed, it imitated nature – understood as *ideal* nature, i.e. as it ought to be and not as it actually was, according to certain notions of decorum and verisimilitude. His system, therefore, did not have to account for individual peculiarities, nor for any departures from the prescribed norms. His sketches constitute the alphabet<sup>12</sup> of a semiotic of expressions, a language of the body which allows direct access to the meaning it is supposed to manifest or to "mark" (52) – like a written sign –, without any shade of obscurity or any possibility of feigning: for there is no space left for interiority, let alone for a private life of the soul in this code. All the expressions described in the text and illustrated in the sketches are defined according to the contrast with the norm "tranquillity", understood as a sort of zero degree of expression in which no part of the face is altered. This "difference", always envisaged as clearly marked and devoid of ambiguity, manifests itself in five elements – the eyebrows, the mouth, the eyes, the lines of the forehead and those of the cheeks and around the nose, to which could be added the colour of the complexion, the size of the apple of the eye – bloodshot or not. Le Brun was careful to isolate every passion almost scientifically, while remaining partially conscious that in practice they could overlap.

Yet Le Brun's perspective was neither scientific nor philosophical, but deliberately pedagogical: he was addressing art students, and the title page of the first edition (1696), reproduced in the English translation of the work by John Williams (London, 1734), shows the interior of a classical studio, with a master showing figures pinned on the wall to a disciple, while another is studying Le Brun's very faces. The purpose of this "method" was to enforce psychological and physical verisimilitude in painting by the study of models originally drawn from nature. Paradoxically of course, it led to the study of types that were almost personifications of passions – the models hanging down from the wall on the title page are certainly more reminiscent to us of emblems such as Ripa's *Iconologia*, Rome, 1603) than of any "nature". Above the scene, a caption on a board reads: "A Method to learn to design the passions" – although the title of the lecture did not originally include the word "method". Significantly most of Le Brun's descriptions reflect this prescriptive (rather than descriptive) outlook, by including phrases such as "can be represented by" or "is to be expressed by". As is

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<sup>12</sup> Hubert Dämisch described it as "l'alphabet des masques" in an introduction to his edition of Le Brun's famous lecture (*Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 21, 1980, p. 123); yet this points to a modern interpretation, since Le Brun claimed to be restoring real nature by following certain criteria of verisimilitude and decorum. He would probably not have accepted the term "mask".

apparent, this rationalistic project demanded from the painter the mastery of a totally *logocentric* knowledge of human passions<sup>13</sup>: at the heart of it was the belief that all passions could be encapsulated in one word, devoid of ambiguity, which exhausted them completely. The assumption was that language (seen rather reductively as a rhetorical code) could encompass the whole of human experience, and consequently, that the latter could be totally known.

## II. The reception of Le Brun's scheme.

Le Brun's pictorial system, although immensely successful, immediately met with some opposition as well. In France, some of his contemporaries and colleagues saw his project with much scepticism, and in particular two men who represented (separately) different attitudes towards rationalism in art, André Félibien (1619-1695), Historiographer and Secretary of the *Académie* from 1671, and Roger de Piles (1635-1709), painter and art critic<sup>14</sup>. It was clear to them that the underlying objective of Le Brun was to undermine the mystique of "je ne sais quoi", and the aesthetic of grace: by claiming that he could define every single expression both verbally and visually, the famous painter implicitly ruled out ambivalence. By the same token he ignored this mysterious power of art which did not reside, according to Félibien and de Piles, in the strict respect of the rules. Félibien thus described beauty as a harmonious symmetry and proportion, distinct from grace which was for him a secret understanding between physical appearance and the sentiments or affections of the soul. The "je ne sais quoi" was this mystical "knot" – analogous in some respect with the union between body and soul – that resulted from the coincidence of beauty and grace in a single work of art:

Que s'il sort quelques figures de la main des plus excellents maîtres, où l'on rencontre une juste convenance de toutes les parties du corps, et une belle uniformité de mouvements qui concourent à une même fin, c'est alors qu'on admire comme quoi la beauté et la grâce forment un ouvrage parfait.

Ce je ne sais quoi qu'on a toujours à la bouche, et qu'on ne peut bien exprimer, est comme le noeud secret qui assemble ces deux parties du corps et de l'esprit. C'est ce qui résulte de la belle symétrie des membres et de

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<sup>13</sup> Cf Brewster Rogerson, "The Art of Painting the Passions", *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Kirchner provides a comprehensive survey of French theories of art and their relationship with artistic practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in *L'Expression des passions. Ausdruck als Darstellung in der französischen Kunst und Kunsttheorie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz, Berliner Schriften zur Kunst, 1991).

l'accord des mouvements: et comme cet assemblage se fait par un moyen extrêmement subtil et caché, on ne peut le voir assez, ni le bien connaître, pour le représenter et pour l'exprimer comme l'on voudrait (...). Car ce je ne sais quoi n'est autre chose qu'une splendeur toute divine, qui naît de la beauté et de la grâce.<sup>15</sup>

In this perspective, it seems obvious that for Félibien the perfect representations of the passions could not be codified: the artist's genius provided the indispensable mediation between an elusive reality and the composed artefact. Significantly, Le Brun and Félibien fell out roughly around the time of the *Conférence*, and it is hardly surprising: for the latter, the difficulty in art resided in the "invisible" or "insensible", which could not be formalised or theorised. On the contrary, Le Brun's scheme posits that everything could be codified. With his grammar of facial expressions, he reduced the whole of the human experience to a gamut of a few "types", universal, timeless, unchanging. Even more fundamentally for Félibien, the different facial expressions looked so alike that it was impossible to differentiate between them, a consequence of Le Brun's opting for the general, the norm, rather than the particular. In fact, it must be said that Félibien, although he thought that Le Brun was wrong to try and build a system for representing the passions, did recognise the usefulness of some of his teaching, in the sixth *Entretien* (1679), as a systematic *method* which could encourage students to copy the masters before confronting the canvas<sup>16</sup>. But he doubted the possibility for Le Brun to share his knowledge with anyone: the constitution of categories must be, according to him, an individual experience for every would-be painter, who could thus discover his own style according to the force of his imagination and his genius. Félibien underlined the singularity of the painter's relationship with his art: the rapport between theory and practice could not be theorised in a systematic way as Le Brun claimed<sup>17</sup>.

Le Brun's scheme was widely read but also much criticised. In England, artists and thinkers followed the polemics quite closely, and there is evidence that Le Brun's engravings circulated widely and that his little lecture was also much read<sup>18</sup>. William Hogarth (1697-1764), in particular,

<sup>15</sup> *Entretiens sur les vies et les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes (I et II)*, ed. René Demoris, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1987, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> *Entretiens* 6, II, p. 256.

<sup>17</sup> See René Demoris, "Le langage du corps et l'expression des passions de Félibien à Diderot", in *Des Mots et des Couleurs* 2, ed. J.-P. Guillermin, Lille, Presses universitaires de Lille, 1986, p. 39-67, see more particularly p. 47-50.

<sup>18</sup> From 1701 to the end of the nineteenth century, there were fourteen English works related to Le Brun's *Conférence*, whether translations, essays or collections of sketches (only five in

mentions in his *Analysis of Beauty* "the common drawing-book, called, Le Brun's passions of the mind; selected from the great master's works for the use of learners"<sup>19</sup>, thereby testifying to the wide use of Le Brun's sketches by artists, and also, incidentally, to the prestige he still possessed in the eyes of tutors in the first half of the eighteenth century<sup>20</sup>. Hogarth seemed to have been aware of the polemic that had raged around Le Brun's scheme. He thus quotes de Piles, probably the most articulate theorist of "grace", and the definition he posits as his own starting point implicitly undermines Le Brun's scheme:

[A] painter can only have [grace] from nature, and doth not know that he hath it, nor in what degree, nor how he communicates it to his works: and that grace and beauty are two different things; beauty pleases by the rules and grace without them. (quoted in *The Analysis of Beauty*, p. vii)

Hogarth, when he dismissed Le Brun's heads as "but imperfect copies" (*ibid.*, p. 127), was following both instinct and his belief in infinite variety as a principle of beauty. This tenet is expressed in a famous passage he allegedly borrowed from the Dutchman Lambert Ten Kate:

The sublime part that I so much esteem, and of which I have begun to speak is a real *Je ne sçai quoi*, or an unaccountable something to most people, and it is the most harmonious propriety, which is a touching or moving unity, or a pathetick agreement or concord, not only of each member to its body, but also of each part to the member of which it is a part: *It is also an infinite variety of parts*.<sup>21</sup>

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Germany and one, plus a reedition, in the Netherlands): for instance, a translation by John Smith, *The Conference... Upon Expression* (London, 1701), John Williams, *A Method to Learn to Design the Passions* (London, 1734), and Bowles's *Passions of the Soul Represented in several Heads, engraved from the Designes of Monsieur Le Brun* (London, 1786), or *Heads Representing the Various Passions of the Soul* (London, 1796), etc. See Montagu for a comprehensive bibliography, *op. cit.*, p. 175-87. For an outlook of the context of Le Brun's reception in England, see *A Method to learn and to Design the Passions*, ed. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, introduction, p. iii-xii.

<sup>19</sup> *The Analysis of Beauty*, London, 1753, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Page, for instance, in his *Art of Painting* (London, 1720) recommends that students train themselves to reproduce Le Brun's heads (p. 17). Le Brun's name appears also in the works of J. Dodsley (*The Preceptor*, [1748], London, 1775, 2 vols., vol. I, p. 408-12), as well as in Richardson and Reynolds.

<sup>21</sup> Hogarth's emphasis. Quoted in *The Analysis of Beauty*, p. xvii. A treatise on "Beau idéal" had been published in Paris under the name of this Dutch theologian in the translation of the works of Jonathan Richardson in 1728. Cf "Discours préliminaire sur le Beau idéal... à l'occasion du livre de Messieurs Richardson", in *Traité de la Peinture*, III, 1728.

In this perspective, Hogarth could only dismiss Le Brun's scheme as rigid and restrictive, and it is likely that he had read (and agreed with) de Piles's famous criticism of it. The latter treated Le Brun's treatise as a mere curiosity, an excessive, failed, experiment, for, according to him, man could not be reduced to a simple rationalistic system of expressions. Le Brun had therefore been guilty of betraying the infinite variety of nature, in a word, of composing a system of caricatures which eventually turned into an idiosyncratic "manière" – which, in fact, Le Brun would actually have denied:

Il semble pourtant qu'en cela même [Le Brun] a trop généralement suivi l'idée qu'il s'en étoit faite, en sorte qu'elle a dégénéré en habitude et en ce qu'on appelle Manière. Cette habitude est belle à la vérité: mais faute d'examiner la Nature & de voir qu'elle peut exprimer une même Passion de différentes façons & qu'il y en a de particulières qui sont vives et piquantes, il a privé ses Ouvrages d'un pris qui (...) leur auroit donné entrée dans les Cabinets des Curieux...<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, he reproached Le Brun's heads with being too much alike; and one can easily see his point by looking at the sketches without reading the captions – some of them could undoubtedly be taken to represent something else, like, for instance, anger, fright or jealousy, which seem interchangeable (fig. 1). When writing his critique, De Piles probably had Le Brun's pictorial style in mind, for he did try to put into practice what he taught. His painting was in fact very successful in the seventeenth century<sup>23</sup>, but it was later to be considered repetitive and grandiloquent for the very reason that he seemed to his detractors to be carrying his hatred of individuality or singularity to such a degree that all the characters he painted seemed to have the very same face<sup>24</sup>.

For his critics were prompt to see in his conception of art – focusing as it did on the general and not the particular – an ideological mistrust of individual differences and, to a certain extent, a hatred for all passionate feelings. These, he seemed to imply, would spell disorder and chaos in a polite society, for they implied the presence of the body. Diderot was later to

<sup>22</sup> *Abrégé de la Vie des Peintres*, Paris, 1699, p. 518.

<sup>23</sup> See Montagu for specific references to Le Brun's influence on French painting, *op. cit.* (especially p. 85-100).

<sup>24</sup> Cf de Piles: "Ce que je dis de cette générale expression des Passions de l'ame peut avoir lieu pour le Dessain tant des Figures que des Airs de tête que le Brun a représentées, car ils sont presque toujours les mêmes quoyque d'un tres beau chois: ce qui vient sans doute, ou d'avoir réduit la Nature à l'habitude qu'il en avoit contractée, ou de n'y avoir pas assez considéré les diversitez dont elle est susceptible et dont les productions singulieres ne sont pas les moins l'objet du Peintre que des générales" (*Abrégé de la Vie des Peintres*, *op. cit.*, p. 518-519)



mention the "intolerable tyranny" of the likes of Le Brun; but he was probably not referring to the *Conférence*, but rather to his tyranny in the way he oversaw the artists, decorators, sculptors, engravers and goldsmiths who were all working under his supervision at Versailles<sup>25</sup>. De Piles finally concluded in a later work that Le Brun's scheme was not only erroneous but also useless, since it overlooked the possibility for one passion to be manifested by more than one facial expressions, depending on the person or the context<sup>26</sup>. In fact, the philosophers of the eighteenth century were frequently to reproach Le Brun with unwittingly basing his system on an elitist conception of man: characteristically, Félibien himself remarked that passions and emotions could and should be expressed differently according to the social origin of the subject<sup>27</sup>. Le Brun, although he did not concern himself with the social dimension, belonged to a society that valued the repression of wild passions as a virtue and took as the norm the "honnête homme", possibly of aristocratic origin as well. He also neglected, needless to say, the cultural differences in the expression of emotions, which he could have derived a sense of through the abundant travel literature of the period. Moreover, as the article "passion" of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-65), written later by the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, makes it clear, it is more or less impossible to reach a "state of nature" for the passions: each society sets norms for the individual to follow, norms which distort noticeably – to a degree that is impossible to measure – the problematical notion of a "natural" reaction or expression.

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<sup>25</sup> Letter to Falconet (5 August 1766), *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth, Paris, éditions de Minuit, 1961, vol. VI, p. 259. Diderot was replying to a friend, the sculptor Falconet, who had denounced the way in which Le Brun had stifled the creativity of all the artists working under him by forcing upon them his own designs and drawings to be reproduced (Letter from Falconet to Diderot, 6 March 1766, p. 154). A confusion on the meaning and the date of this quote (with a mistake on the date of the letter) occurs in Alan McKenzie's introduction to *A Method to learn to design the Passions*, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

<sup>26</sup> Cf *Cours de Peinture par principes* [1704], Paris, TEL Gallimard, 1989, p. 92. This book was well known in England, and this very passage is quoted by John Dodsley in his *Preceptor*: "However I am of Opinion with Mr De Piles, that it is absurd as well as impossible to pretend to give such particular Demonstrations of [the passions] as to fit their Expression to certain Strokes, which the Painter should be obliged to make use of as essential and invariable Rules. This, says he, would be depriving the Art of that excellent Variety of Expression which has no other Principle than Diversity of Imagination, the Number of which is infinite. The same Passion may be finely expressed several Ways, each yielding more or less pleasure in proportion to the Painter's Understanding, and the Spectator's Discernment." (vol. I, p. 411)

<sup>27</sup> *Entretiens* 6, II, p. 220: "il y a donc des ris de condition." In an oblique comment on Le Brun, Félibien had also stressed the difficulty in promulgating types as people might want to conceal their emotions: "Il faut encore remarquer que les mouvements du visage peuvent estre quelquefois cachez et dissimulez par la volonté de la personne passionnée." (p. 251)

The other facet of Le Brun's scheme was to provide a basis for the systematic exposition of a physiognomic system, which he presented as his next project in the conclusion to his lecture. In fact the assembly had to wait three more years for the announced *Conférence sur la physionomie*, given in 1671. It was a major interest of Le Brun's, as the two hundred and fifty physiognomic sketches and drawings kept at the *Cabinet de dessins* at the Louvre show. He was convinced that some faces could come to be distorted through the unrelenting effects of a particular passion – a hypothesis which Leonardo and Lomazzo had already toyed with in their own physiognomic heads<sup>28</sup>. But Le Brun shows himself undoubtedly a man of his time when he fails to articulate a theory of the innate and the acquired, which, on the contrary, was going to be a main concern of eighteenth-century thinkers. Like the drawings of Giambattista della Porta<sup>29</sup>, his physiognomic sketches all go to show that some faces are innately similar to animal heads, and that the individuals with these faces share certain characteristics with the animals they look like. The two perspectives – does a face *become* animal-like or was it created that way? – blur, which is not without creating some confusion. Ignoring the problem, Le Brun expands in his lecture and sketches an almost geometrical physiognomic system, that classifies people according to the angle of their profile – an idea which Camper and Lavater were later to seize on<sup>30</sup>. Hogarth might also have been influenced by those ideas, as a satirist interested in caricature, but he never developed this interest into a system.

For it seems established that the great British artist knew Le Brun's work quite well<sup>31</sup>; visual echoes between sketches of Le Brun's and some of Hogarth's characters have been amply documented – such as, among others, the Frenchman's faces for fright or horror identified in a scene of *The Rake's Progress* or in the great portrait of Garrick as Richard the Third<sup>32</sup> (fig. 2). Yet some of the parallels which it has become conventional to invoke remain quite vague. If we are to follow Alastair Smart or Alan McKenzie in seeing

<sup>28</sup> See in particular Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della Pittura*, Milan, 1584, Part II.

<sup>29</sup> *De Humane Physiognomoniam*, Sorrento, 1586.

<sup>30</sup> This was a remarkable anticipation for instance of the "facial angle" which Camper was to define in Amsterdam in 1791; Le Brun was also a major influence on Lavater (*Essai sur la Physiognomonie*, Amsterdam, 1781-1803). See on the topic Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Aberrations*, Paris, Flammarion, 1983, p. 9-53.

<sup>31</sup> Another major influence along the same line was the important treatise by the Dutchman, Gérard de Lairesse, *Groot Schilderboek*, Amsterdam, 1707, translated by John Frederick Fritsch as *The Art of Painting in All its Branches*, London, 1738, which deals with whole attitudes, rather than just with facial expressions. Cf Alastair Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 91-92.

<sup>32</sup> See Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 93-94, and Alan T. McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 760-62. For other borrowings, see also Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth*, new edition, 3 vols., Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1991-93, I: 105, 160, II: 424, n. 31.

Garrick's expression in the famous portrait as an allusion to "fright", then we need to account for a puzzling difference: for the Frenchman specifically stated that in the representation of fright, the mouth of the character ought to be shown as wide open, which it is not in Hogarth's portrait. Of course, McKenzie sees that, and he hastens to add that he can read some guilt in the actor's face as well, "especially in the lower half of the face"<sup>33</sup>; but then guilt does not figure among Le Brun's passions. More seriously, Le Brun shared with his contemporaries a fascination for Italian art and Classical statuary, and it was in the study of the masters that he found his models. Would Hogarth really bother copying out Le Brun's sketches? The "borrowings" would undoubtedly have been recognised as such by the connoisseur. What could have been Hogarth's intention? Besides, it is likely that the idea of such a coherent *system* of signs seemed suspicious in the eyes of the English theorist of variety and freedom. Hogarth's context was that of England's resistance to French rationalism in art and literature, as, for instance, in ornamental gardens, which were deemed too formal, even tyrannical – with their unified prospects based on central perspective<sup>34</sup>. Of course, there had been followers of Descartes in England who elaborated rationalistic systems in the same vein as Le Brun's scheme: in the 1640s, for instance, John Bulwer published two treatises which meant to codify the gestures of the hands in oratory<sup>35</sup>. In the realm of linguistics, John Wilkins, a member of the Royal Society, wrote an important essay to define a completely universal language based on a mathematical system<sup>36</sup>. Even though these were isolated enterprises, they were analogous to Le Brun's *Conférence*: in each case, the aim was to establish a comprehensive grammar, made of discreet elements (which could in turn be combined to make up more complex signs), so as to create a codified language devoid of ambiguity.

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<sup>33</sup> McKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 765.

<sup>34</sup> For the English landscape garden as a conscious rejection of the French formality, see John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, eds., *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*, London, Elek, 1975, p. 7, and Michel Baridon, "History, Myth, and the English Garden", in *The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House*, ed. Gervase Jackson-Stops, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Folger Institute, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, 1989, p. 373-92.

<sup>35</sup> *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand, Chironomia or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, London, 1644. Both were to be read and used by other rhetoricians such as Obadiah Walker (*The Art of Oratory*, London, 1659) or John Walker (*Elements of Elocution*, London, 1781), not to mention Gilbert Austin later (*Chironomia*, London, 1806). Le Brun did not seem to have known Bulwer.

<sup>36</sup> *An Essay towards a real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668). George Dalgarno had published a similar treatise in 1661 (*Ars signorum, vulgo Character universalis et lingua philosophica...*). Wilkins also wrote a curious treatise on all existing codes, *Mercury or the Swift Messenger* (1641).

If Bulwer's and Wilkins's projects are isolated in England, it has probably something to do first with a nationalistic desire to set English culture apart from its French counterpart<sup>37</sup> and, second, with different national philosophical traditions<sup>38</sup>. Thus when James Parsons tries to emulate Le Brun with a rationalistic treatise on physiognomy, *Human Physiognomy Explain'd* (London, 1747), he undermines his enterprise by an excessively mechanical treatment of the subject. The inflated pseudo-scientific jargon he uses, which purports to give an authoritative tone to the work, and the poor quality of his drawings also do disservice to his work. Hogarth displays his mistrust of rules and systems when he indirectly rebuked his friend Parsons in *The Analysis of Beauty* and gave his own definition of expression, incidentally showing by the same token the depth of his understanding of Le Brun's abortive scheme. By favouring the notion of variety both as a constitutive characteristic of nature and as a principle of art, he insisted on the impossibility of establishing absolute laws in the realm of expression:

[T]he face is the index of the mind (...).It is by the natural and unaffected movements of the muscles, caused by the passions of the mind, that every man's character would in some measure be written in his face, by that time he arrives at forty years of age, were it not for certain accidents which often, tho' not always prevent it. For the ill-natur'd man, by frequently frowning and pouting out the muscles of his mouth, doth in time bring those parts to a constant state of the appearance of ill-nature, which might have been prevented by the constant affectation of a smile; and so of the other passions: tho' there are some that do not affect the muscles at all simply of themselves, as love and hope. But least I should be thought to lay too great a stress on outward shew, like a physiognomist, take this with you, that it is acknowledg'd there are so many different causes which produce the same kind of movements and appearances of features, and so many thwartings by accidental shapes in the make of faces, that the old adage, *fronti nulla fides*, will ever stand its ground upon the whole; and for very wise reasons nature hath particular cases, we receive information from the expressions of the countenance, what follows is meant to give a lineal description of the language written therein.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See for instance the nationalistic tone of some of Dryden's prefaces or of his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668).

<sup>38</sup> Post-Baconian empiricism thrived under the aegis of the Royal Society, and was contemporary with a vast anti-cartesian movement. See Richard Kroll, *The Material World: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

<sup>39</sup> p. 126-27. This is very close to Addison's point of view in *The Spectator*, 86, June 8, 1711: "a wise Man should be particularly cautious how he gives Credit to a Man's outward Appearance" (*The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, vol. III, p. 368).

One has gone a long way from the universal faces of Le Brun's ideal person in the *Conférence*, or from his monstrous animal-faced human beings of the second Lecture. Hogarth is careful to list the factors that cause faces to vary – such as ageing (and its ‘accidents’), the effects of the personality or the dominant passions. One is struck by the multiplicity of modifiers and qualifications in this passage (“in some measure”, “often, tho’ not always”, “might”...): Hogarth here presents us with a subtle antidote to Le Brun and the likes of Parsons by re-asserting the resistance of the living to rules and the necessity of an empirical approach to phenomena.

### III. Le Brun’s *Conférence* and the theatre.

The alleged influence of Le Brun on the "pathetic style" in the theatre has also become a commonplace of recent criticism. Smart and McKenzie base themselves on contemporary narratives of Garrick's performances as well as on Hogarth's famous portrait of the great actor first to identify allusions to Le Brun's delineation of the passions, and then to historicize our perception of his style of acting. It is obvious that what might appear to us artificial and grandiloquent might have been hailed as the ‘true’ artistic representation of emotions in the eighteenth century. A study of acting styles allows us some insight into both the production and the reception of those representations. Significantly, the model for the expression of sentiment was primarily pictorial; both arts shared a language. Le Brun himself had occasionally drawn illustrations for the printed works of Corneille and Racine. Reciprocally, Hogarth, among others, acknowledged the influence of the aesthetics of the theatre on his art: "Subjects I consider'd as writers do, my Picture was my Stage, and men and women my actors who were, by Means of certain Actions and expressions, to exhibit a dumb show"<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, even among French Academic painters – where, admittedly, this attitude was not common –, the theatre could be seen as a convenient sphere of experience. Thus the painter Antoine Coyppel (1661-1722) advised the students of art to go and study the passions in the theatre:

Les spectacles me paraissent fort nécessaires à ceux qui veulent se perfectionner dans la peinture et je ne suis pas surpris que les peintres et les sculpteurs de l'antiquité qui voulaient se distinguer par rapport à l'imitation

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Sean Shesgreen, ed., *Engravings by Hogarth*, New York, Dover Publications, 1973, p. xxii. Hogarth pleaded for a close connection between literature and the visual arts.

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des passions, dans les gestes et les attitudes, allaient toujours étudier dans les spectacles publics et y dessinaient les attitudes et les gestes qui représentaient les plus vivement les mouvements de la nature, soit par les acteurs, les danseurs ou les pantomimes.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely actors were advised to study the masters before acting, as in Thomas Wilkes's *General View of the Stage* (1759), so as to acquire:

a competent skill in Poetry, Painting, Music, and Oratory, that he may be enabled judiciously to select whatever is graceful in each, and transfuse it into his own performance, for there is an affinity between all arts, and they are mutually assistant to each other.<sup>42</sup>

When he describes the correct positioning of the actor in connection with his audience, Thomas Betterton himself refers explicitly to the composition of history painting:

As in a piece of History Painting, tho' the Figures fix their Eyes ever so directly to each other, yet the Beholder, by the Advantage of their Position, has a full view of the Expression of the soul in the Eyes of the Figures.<sup>43</sup>

This testifies to the essential connection made between the two modes of representing the passions which are seen as governed by the same code and categories. The interchange between the theatre and the pictorial arts can be extended to fiction as well, a parallel suggested by Hogarth himself. It is significant that in eighteenth-century English novels, the rhetoric of passions often emphasises the visualness of expressions and attitudes: as has often been pointed out, characters of fiction are usually described from their external appearances and, what is more, framed within the segment of a vignette, and the aesthetic is often reminiscent of the theatre<sup>44</sup>.

It is more specifically in Garrick's style of acting that critics have seen the influence of Le Brun's typology. For around the time when Garrick was active, a major change in acting style seems to have been under way. Various contemporary witnesses, whose accounts were later compiled by John Genest, point to a departure from the traditional declamatory style,

<sup>41</sup> "Sur l'esthétique du peintre", in *Conférences de l'Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, ed. Henry Jouin, Paris, 1883, p. 348.

<sup>42</sup> p. 82. Quoted by Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> *The History of the English Stage*, London, 1741, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-century Sensibility and the Novel. The Senses in Social Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, chap. 5.

which they seem to see most obviously in Garrick's style, even though he was probably no the initiator of it<sup>45</sup>:

Garrick's easy and familiar, yet forcible style of speaking and acting, at first threw the Critics into some hesitation concerning the propriety as well as novelty of his manner – they had been long accustomed to an elevation of the voice, with a sudden mechanical depression of its tones, calculated to excite admiration and to entrap applause – to the just modulation of the words, and concurring expression of the features from the genuine workings of nature, they had been strangers, at least for some time – Quin, after he had seen Garrick in some important character, declared peremptorily that "if the young fellow was right he and the rest of the players had been wrong" – (*Davies*) – Garrick saw that nature was banished from the theatre but he flattered himself that he should be able to revive a better taste, and succeed by the truth of imitation (*Murphy*).<sup>46</sup>

Contemporary witnesses all report the extraordinary plasticity of Garrick's face. The actor seemed capable of suggesting various emotions in quick succession, in such a way as to make them easily identifiable – i. e. verbally – by a perceptive audience, as Genest reports:

Garrick (...) set out at the very head of the profession – he chose Richard the third for his first appearance (...), the moment he entered on the stage, the character he assumed was visible on his countenance; the power of his imagination was such, that he transformed himself into the very man; the passions rose in rapid succession, and before he uttered a word, were legible in every feature of that various face (...) in all this the audience saw a most exact imitation of nature... It was no wonder that an actor thus accomplished made a deep impression on the audience. (*ibid.*, p. 14-15)

But this does not have to be a direct influence of Le Brun: this 'novelty' can be seen as part of a larger movement of sensibility, which, in a way, the *Conférence* also testifies to in its early forms, and which saw the pre-eminence of Italian painting as setting the absolute canons of what was to be expected in art. The sensibility movement in the visual as well as in the theatre could thus derive, paradoxically, from the same source as seventeenth-century rationalism. This hypothesis could in fact help solve the

<sup>45</sup> On this topic, see the chapter on Garrick in Paulson's *Hogarth*, *op. cit.*, p. 246-60.

<sup>46</sup> *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols., Bath, 1832, vol. II, p. 16.

embarrassing problem of explaining why the alleged influence of the Frenchman was not more vivid in his own country, where the dramatic tradition, very different from what it was in England, could have made room for it.

While England saw a proliferation of pamphlets and treatises on acting in the eighteenth century<sup>47</sup>, French theorists of the period did not focus on the performance of the actors, but rather on aspects of the production, by concentrating over and over again on the rules and their application by great French authors<sup>48</sup>. This difference in emphasis reflects in fact several cultural differences. The French theatre, like any other artistic activity, was dominated by a centralised social system, with at its centre the *Comédie française*; but this institution was only the most official manifestation of the existence of academic structures that perpetuated the same style of acting without leaving much space for innovation. The French style was based on declamation, meant to serve great tragic texts such as those of Racine. At the other end of the spectrum, before the sentimental drama took over in the second half of the century, the comedy was represented by Molière and the diction was still very much influenced by the Italian *Commedia dell' Arte*. Finally the Classical rules, defined in the seventeenth century, were still more or less dominant until around 1750; they can be seen as equivalent in the realm of theatre to the rules for the pictorial representation of expressions set by Le Brun. In other words, there was no explicit connection in France established between Le Brun's scheme and the rules for the theatre, for the latter were based on a priority given to the text, with the underlying belief that performance did not *matter* that much since the text was what mattered most.

When Garrick came to Paris around the middle of the century, he was the talk of the day and left a durable impression on all those who saw him act Shakespeare: "The Englishman innovative acting with its accents on gesture and mime was the antithesis of the static declamatory style of his French counterparts"<sup>49</sup>. Only one French treatise on acting seems to foresee

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<sup>47</sup> Most of them were published around the middle of the century; no fewer than twenty of them appeared between 1741 and 1790 (reported by Ronald W. Vince, *Neoclassical Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook*, New York, Westport, London, Greenwood Press, 1988, p. 42).

<sup>48</sup> This is the case in an otherwise very interesting book on the arts by the Abbé du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (Paris, 1719), which includes only a few passages on the actor – to the effect that he ought to avoid too much grandiloquence. Even *De l'Art de la Comédie, ou détail raisonné des diverses parties de la comédie et de ses différents genres*, by Jean-François Cailhava de l'Estendoux (Paris, 1772) is still mainly concerned with the respect of the rules.

<sup>49</sup> Frances M. Wilkshire, "Garrick's Role in the Shakespeare's controversy in France", in *L'Age du Théâtre en France/The Age of Theatre in France*, ed. David Trott and Nicole



the changes in sensibility which were to take place in France too, in the second half of the eighteenth century. In his preface to *Le Comédien* (Paris, 1747)<sup>50</sup>, the playwright Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine acknowledges the novelty of his enterprise:

L'art de composer des Pièces de Théâtre a été porté dans ce Royaume à un plus haut degré de perfection que partout ailleurs. On auroit dû naturellement y voir quelqu'un entreprendre de rédiger, d'une façon claire et méthodique, ce qu'on peut dire sur l'art de les représenter. (p. 3)

For singularly, no French treatise on the art of performing was available before his. It was therefore *his* responsibility to produce the "method" for the benefit of comedians. The event of Garrick's visit with the date of appearance of this treatise might not be purely coincidental: everything points to a gradual, underground change in aesthetics. Sainte-Albine even goes so far as to define a relatively new notion in the French context, that of "sentiment", to which he gives a very specific meaning; for him, it is: "la facilité [pour les acteurs] de faire succéder dans leur âme des diverses passions, dont l'homme est susceptible" (*ibid.*, p. 32). This reminds us of the "rapid succession" of passions Garrick was capable of showing on the stage. Perhaps one could trace an influence here; this treatise heralds a change in the way acting was seen in eighteenth-century France, with a new emphasis on facial expression and feeling<sup>51</sup>.

Le Brun's influence was in fact limited in the realm of the theatre and it might have been overemphasised in the visual arts. It might have become apparent in this paper that his *Conférence* was received differently in France and in England. Across the Channel, Le Brun's system might have first helped foster the realisation that the representations of sentiments could be codified to be universally legible; it was probably helpful in elaborating a

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Boursier, Edmonton, Alberta, Academic Printing and Publishing, 1988, p. 219-30, here p. 220. See F. Hedgcock, *Un acteur cosmopolite: David Garrick et ses amis français* (Paris, Hachette, 1911) and Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1985.

<sup>50</sup> It was to be used as a basis by Aaron Hill for his treatise, *The Actor* (London, 1750), before being translated back into French as part of *Garrick, ou les acteurs anglois* (Paris, 1769) – which was in fact the direct occasion of Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (written 1770, published 1830).

<sup>51</sup> Sainte-Albine adds, as an implicit reproof to Le Brun: "Un Acteur, qui se propose de représenter les effets d'une passion, ne doit pas, s'il veut jouer avec vérité, se contenter d'emprunter les mouvemens [sic] que cette passion excite également chez *tous les hommes*. Il faut qu'elle prenne chez lui la forme particulière, qui la distingue dans le sujet dont il entreprend d'être la copie. (p. 137) (...) Il faut que les passions se peignent avec vivacité sur le visage du Comédien. Il ne faut pas qu'elles le défigurent." (p. 148) The emphasis is mine.

more systematic approach to acting, or at least in encouraging actors (and possibly playwrights) to look at the pictorial arts for inspiration. If this was indeed the case, then it was an incentive to aesthetic experimentation. Finally, if an influence is to be felt, it is in the way it helped counterbalance a national predilection for empiricism. In France, the *Conférence* did leave a durable imprint on painting, because it was congenial to the wider movement of Academies, although opposition to the lecture can be read as a locus for resistance to some of the most radical forms of Classicism. But it does not seem to have led to systematic applications in the realm of the theatre, which had its own strict rules. These paradoxically had little to say to actors, or about them, as if acting was considered as a secondary, derivative activity – contrary to what was the case in England. In the context of these rules, seen and felt at times as stifling, it can almost be said that French actors still had to discover that they had a body to sculpt and shape – a realisation which must have dawned on them on seeing Garrick act. Only then was it possible to start discussing anew the issue of whether it was advisable for an actor to feel what he was supposed to enact – which was to take such a prominence in some theoretical writing of the second half of the century<sup>52</sup>. Significantly the same could also be said about the pictorial posterity of Le Brun: for by creating a representative system that did not seem to allow any loophole, he had spirited away the body, and his system was to constitute an aesthetic obstacle to be overcome in the name of nature and sentiment. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the days of ‘Classicism’ were over in France, even if the pathetic style took longer to emerge from the limbos of rationalism than in England – where it was probably more congenial with national traditions. In the nineteenth century, the teachings of Le Brun were to go through a revival under the pen of physiognomonists, but this was all in all a marginal interest that spelt their final decline.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf Sainte-Albine, Diderot, Rousseau, etc. The question of whether a painter ought to feel what he wanted to suggest was of course widely debated, even in Le Brun’s time. No need to say that to this question he would have answered by the negative, by virtue of his system, contrary to what de Piles thought, for instance.