Dependency, Corruption, and Aesthetics in Denis Diderot's *Le neveu de Rameau*

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Denis Diderot's posthumously published satire *Le neveu de Rameau* (probably written between 1761-1772) displays a complex network of references to some of the most difficult years, 1751-1759, in the history of the great Enlightenment project *L'Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des metiers,* of which Diderot was co-founder and chief editor. The 1750s constituted a period of ideological tension and increasing political paranoia in France, and from being a project of national prestige, the *Encyclopédie* was by then considered a threat to the religious, social, and political order of *l'ancien regime*. As was announced in Louis XV's decree concerning the book trade in 1757, printing and diffusion of text that "tends to attack religion, to stir up the spirits, to question Our authority, and to trouble the order and tranquillity of our states" was punishable by death (quoted from Israel, 2009, p. 14). The *Encyclopedie* project was suspended more than once by the courts and, as chief editor of the *Encyclopédie,* Diderot was in a permanently dangerous situation. The police had kept an eye on him since 1749, but from 1757 onwards he felt even more unable to express his views publicly. It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the most salient themes of *Le neveu de Rameau* is unfreedom. Normally, Diderot would discuss his writings in private correspondences, but *Le neveu de Rameau* was apparently composed in utter secrecy (Freud, 1967, p. 23). This silence has, of course, prompted much speculation. Why Diderot never mentioned the satire, no sure evidence can tell us. However, since it was first published in 1805 in German by Goethe, the satire, which consists of a long, digressive imaginary philosophical conversation between two half-fictional half-authentic characters, *Lui* and *Moi*, has been regarded as Diderot's secret revenge on the opponents of

the *Encyclopédie*, the so-called anti-philosophers or anti-Encyclopaedists.[1] In close cooperation with, if not simply on the orders of powerful figures of the court, parliament, and church, these enemies of the *Encyclopédie* tried to stop the publication of the great work through a mixture of negative publicity and regular smear campaigns. Of course, the attempt did not succeed. The *Encyclopédie* was published, but only just.

Picking up on Goethe, the purpose of this article is to discuss *Le neveu de Rameau* in the context of the unfreedom that Diderot experienced while editing the *Encyclopédie*. As will be clear in what follows, the nature of his unfreedom goes beyond the mere fact of being restrained by the system of censorship regulation. Furthermore, the characters in *Le neveu de Rameau* are only indirectly connected with the Encyclopaedists and the anti-Encyclopaedists. The one main character, who appears under the anonymous pronoun *Lui*, refers to Jean-François Rameau, a poor musician and nephew of the great French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, while *Moi* is a naïve and idealistic version of Diderot, himself. The central music and opera theme – which ranges far more widely than the reference to France's then leading composer Rameau – has a crucial role to play in the satire's interpretation of the anti-philosophers' attempt to obstruct the publication of the *Encyclopédie*. There is a connection between what we, with Goethe, may call the vengeance function of *Le neveu de Rameau*, and the theme of unfreedom. However, there may be said to be a complex correlation. *Le neveu de Rameau* intervenes in its historical context in a number of ways and at many levels. In addition, Diderot is an inexorable dialectician. The subjects he takes up refuse to fall easily into stable categories and unequivocal meanings, just as unfreedom itself is dealt with in *Le neveu de Rameau*.

The theme of unfreedom is signalled from the very beginning. The prologue is adorned with an epigraph by Diderot's favourite poet Horace, which translates into English as: "Born under the evil influence of every Vertumnus." Vertumnus was the Roman god of the change of the seasons, and it is *inter alia* in this meaning – changeability – that we should look for the epigraph's signalling effect on the first page of the satire.[2] However, the Horatian satire cited is known as the *Saturnalian satire*, because it takes place during the period of *Saturnalia,* the

1 The anti-philosophers consisted of a large and quite powerful group of judges, journalists, poets, teachers, Franciscans, Jansenists, and Jesuits. All of these persons had close connections with wealthy patrons with great influence in the Court, among them Louis-August Bertin de Blagny, who plays a key role in *Le neveu de Rameau*.

2 "every *Vertumnus*" refers, of course, to the fact that Vertumnus is never the same but constantly changes shape, like the seasons.

religious Roman feast and carnival celebrated around the winter solstice. What is remarkable about this feast and carnival is that the normal social hierarchy was turned upside down during the days of the carnival. The feast commenced with a procession led by a person of very low rank disguised as a king, which set the scene for the slaves to exchange role and place with their masters, the condemned with the judges, etc. By referring to Horace's satire and the *Saturnalia,* Diderot not only introduces a theme of freedom and unfreedom, but also warns the reader that the contents of these concepts are by no means stable or clear. Who is free and who is unfree and what it means to be unfree is left open from the outset.

Despite this openness, here *Lui* seems the unfree one, and in more than one sense. Firstly, he is slave to his "besoin" or his "appétit" – hunger, instinct, desire or lust. Secondly, he is a slave of those who can satisfy his needs and desires. Hence, *Lui* is both physically and socially unfree. As we shall see, *Lui's* social unfreedom can be described on the basis of Philip Pettit's definition of freedom (unfreedom, respectively) from his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997). In this book, Pettit states that freedom cannot be defined exclusively according to Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between positive and negative liberty in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Berlin, 1969). Freedom must also be understood as the absence of dependency and domination, as "non-domination" (Pettit, 1997, p. 5). In his introduction, Pettit makes it clear that unfreedom as non-domination has nothing to do with being restrained by the laws of a legitimate government (ibid). Quite to the contrary, the "restraint of a fair system of law – a non-arbitrary regime – does not make you unfree" (ibid). The unfreedom that Pettit has in mind consists in being subject to arbitrary sway or to the "potentially capricious will or potentially idiosyncratic judgement of another" (ibid). Although Pettit's concept of unfreedom can be politically defined or politically legitimized (as in monarchy, for instance), he is first and foremost referring to non-formal, social, or intersubjective relations. Unfreedom as domination refers to a situation in which someone is or *feels* compelled to always take someone else's will or desire into consideration.

Pettit's definition of unfreedom can be applied to the principal character of *Le neveu de Rameau*. The most striking feature of the nephew is that he lives in dependency and under the domination of others. People with money, influence and power can get him to do anything at all. In particular, *Lui* is at the beck and call of the wealthy and powerful, but also very capricious Bertin, an extremely affluent financier and a member of *l'Académie des inscriptions et des belles-lettres*. The character is based upon the real Louis-August Bertin de Blagny, who, during the *Encyclopédie's* most critical years, 1752-1765, played an im-

portant role as patron of the Encyclopaedists' enemies. In the fictional world of *Le neveu de Rameau*, the nephew gains entry to Bertin's salon and well-filled dinner table thanks to a well-developed sense of being in service to the rich and – as he himself explains to *Moi* – service is about tracking the desire of the master.

The nephew simultaneously functions as the carrier of the satirical view and tone of the dialogue. He commands the floor, and it is he who taunts and mocks and reveals what the world is like in reality. *Le neveu de Rameau* is a satire about society in general and polite society in particular, both described as being in a state of degeneration and corruption. And with his insider knowledge of Bertin's circle, the nephew is eminently placed in terms of observing the corrupt nature of the rich and powerful, indeed of the whole tissue of society. For this reason, *Moi* – the philosopher – likes to talk to someone like the nephew:

"[…] leur caractère tranche avec celui des autres, et [qu']ils rompent cette fastidieuse uniformité que notre education, nos conventions de société, nos bienséance d'udage ont introduite [referring specifically to the nephew *Moi* says:] Il secoue, il agite; il fait approuver ou blamer; il fait sortir la vérité; il fait connaître les gens de bien; il démasque les coquins; c'est alors que l'homme de bon sens écoute, et démêle son monde." (Diderot, 1989, p. 72)

"[…] their characters contrast sharply with other people's and break the tedious uniformity that our social conventions and set politeness have brought about [referring specifically to the nephew *Moi* says:] He stirs people up and gives them a shaking, makes them take sides, brings out the truth, shows who are really good and unmasks the villains. It is then that the wise man listens and sorts people out." (Diderot, 1966, p.35)

Already at this point it is clear that the "servant," or "slave," *Lui*, is superior to the philosopher, *Moi*. The slave sees the world in a clearer light than "the wise man," who sees everything through the flattering prism of his moral ideals. This brings us to the central matter of this article. In *Le neveu de Rameau* unfreedom has some "advantages" in the shape of great intellectual broad-mindedness and, what is of particular interest to me here, great aesthetic sensitivity. The nephew knows everything about both French and Italian opera – prefering the latter – goes into ecstasies when he listens to or recalls a piece of music, and formulates a new poetics for the opera that breaks with classicist doctrine – which his uncle's music respects. Diderot has, however, also equipped the nephew with a seemingly strange double competency: he has both a visionary aesthetic gift and he is a master of the art of flattery, or service. What is the logic behind this connection between social unfreedom and aesthetic sensitivity? More precisely,

what is it about the nephew's servitude that makes him able to break with the classicist aesthetic and its ideals of clarity, harmony, propriety, and moderation?

LUI'S UNFREEDOM

On the general level, *Lui*'s unfreedom consists in his being governed by "external" or physical forces such as hunger: "Son premier soin, le matin, quand il est levé, est de savoir où il dînera; après diner, il pense où il ira souper" ("His first care when he gets up in the morning is to make sure where he will be dining; after dinner he thinks where to go for supper," Diderot, 1989, p. 71; Diderot, 1966, p. 34). *Lui* appears to *Moi* to be "an eating subject" rather than "a fellow thinking subject" (Zalloua, 2003, p. 198). His day passes rushing hectically from house to house, ingratiating himself here, pleasing and enthusing there, in the hope of being invited to dine. In a way, he is a caricature of the physiological determinism that Diderot – if somewhat ambiguously – professed in his materialistic writings. The nephew is carried away by every outburst of desire or passion, and in that sense he may also be said to incarnate the typical Enlightenment concept of unfreedom, understood here along with Isaiah Berlin as being governed by "irrational impulses, uncontrolled desires, my 'lower' nature […] my 'empirical' or 'heteronom' self" (Berlin, 1969, p. 9). *Lui* may be regarded as a satirical personification of the moral, human, and political imperfections from which the philosophers of the Enlightenment wished to free the human race by lifting it up to the higher level of reason, autonomy, and self-control through upbringing and reforms. *Moi* makes several attempts to appeal to the nephew's better nature by reminding him of how disgraceful, undignified, and unhappy his life is. Instead he should instil in himself "La connaissance de ses devoirs; l'amour de la vertu; la haine du vice" ("knowledge of one's duties, love of virtue, hatred of vice", Diderot, 1989, p. 137; Diderot, 1966, p. 82). Virtue, dignity and happiness come from helping one's friends and fighting for one's country. But the philosopher is wasting his breath, because according to *Lui*: "Il n'y a plus de patrie. Je ne vois d'un pole à l'autre que des tyrans et des esclaves" ("There is no such thing left [as one's country]. From pole to pole all I can see is tyrants and slaves", Diderot, 1989, p. 114; Diderot, 1966, p. 65). If one is wealthy, one should enjoy one's good fortune; if one is poor, one must:

> "faire la sa cour, morbleu; faire sa cour; voir les grands; étudier leurs gouts; se prêter à leurs fantaisies; server leurs vices; approuver leurs injustices." (Diderot, 1989, p. 115)

"Butter people up, good God, butter them up, watch the great, study their tastes, fall in with their whims, pander to their vices, approve of their injustices" (Diderot, 1989, p. 65)

What *Lui* is really saying is that one can only maintain one's dignity – understood here as working for the common good, and not allowing oneself to be pushed around by physical impulses or powerful tyrants – if one is in relationships characterised by equality. It is only if one can identify equally with others as fellow citizens that one can see common interests and a larger political community.[3] But in a world where some are rich and others are poor, and where some dominate others, there exists no equality, no common interests, and no common good. In this world, all pursue their primitive impulses and private interests with every means at their disposal.

The involuntary gestures, spasms, and pantomimes that frequently accompany the character's words and thoughts also belong to the picture of *Lui*'s unfreedom. These involuntary pantomimes, for which the nephew is famed, occur especially when he speaks about an intense desire for something – good food, a woman's breast, a glass of good wine – or when he is seized by strong feelings, such as when he talks about or recalls music. In these states, consisting of primitive impulsive desires and aesthetic emotions, all words and notions are accompanied by a gesture, thus giving us the impression of a primitive continuity between consciousness, language, and body. *Lui* cannot think, feel, or talk without leaving corporeal traces in the form of spasms, giving the feeling of a person who repeatedly travels back into the history of civilisation before language, back to the natural, gestural, and mimetic language that the philosophers of the time thought preceded conventional language. Thus, the unfreedom has connotations of belonging to a lower rung of civilisation, which may be turned into something more positive, as it is *inter alia* this spasmodic body that makes *Lui* the liberating, non-conformist character that he also is.

Finally, *Lui*'s unfreedom manifests itself in the form of the domination exercised over him by Bertin and his clique:

"J'étais leur petit Rameau, leur joli Rameau, leur Rameau le fou, l'impertinents, l'ignorant, le paresseux, le gourmand, le bouffon, la grosse bête. Il n'y avait pas une de ces epithets familières qui ne me valût un sourire, une caresse, un petit coup sur l'épaule, un

3 Cf. Tue Andersen Nexø: "Materially Unfree. Corruption as a societal diagnosis and the political forms of unfreedom in Machiavelli, Davenant, and Bolingbroke", in this book.

soufflet, un coup de pied, à table un bon morceau qu'on jetait sur mon assiette […] car moi, je suis sans consequence." (Diderot, 1989, p. 88)

"I was their dear Rameau, their pretty Rameau, their Rameau the lunatic, the impertinent, the ignorant, the lazy, greedy old fool. Not one of these pet names but earned me a smile, a caress, a tap on the shoulder, a box on the ears, a kick, a toothsome morsel chucked on to my plate during meals […] I could take without its being of any consequences, for I am a person who isn't of any consequence." (Diderot, 1966, p. 46)

Lui is defined by others. He is nothing himself but a projection of the vices, characteristics, and faults of his surroundings. It was *inter alia* this aspect of Diderot's character that caught Hegel's interest and caused him to incorporate *Le neveu de Rameau* within *Phenomenologie des Geistes*. Hegel viewed the nephew as an image of a phase in the history of the development of consciousness, where the I has not yet found itself, and is alienated in external definitions. But instead of regarding *Lui* from the perspective of Hegelian alienation, we can see him from the perspective of republican liberty. As mentioned above, Philip Pettit – in contrast to Berlin and the liberal tradition – has argued that freedom should also be understood as "non-domination," that is, the absence of dependency and domination. "Domination" should be understood here as the consequence of great inequality, of dependency relations that cause the powerless party to constantly consider the interests and wishes of the powerful (Pettit, 1997, p. 60-61). The nephew's relationship to Bertin may be said to be prototypical for such a domination and dependency relationship, and it is in the light of this unfreedom – and not because the nephew has not yet found an authentic expression of his subjectivity – that his change of identity, his "alienation", should be understood.

The relationship with Bertin implies several things, the first being that the nephew is not free to express his own honest opinions. That this is the case is shown when, in a surprising and singular attack on "dignité," he expresses his honest opinion of Bertin and his mistress. He is immediately shown the door and told never to show himself again. Like the anti-philosophers, *Lui* only has access to Bertin's food and hospitality as long as his behaviour pleases Bertin, in other words as long as *Lui* complies with the wishes of his master and mistress: "[il faut] chercer son désir dans yeux, rester suspend à sa lèvre, attendre son ordre…" ("we try to read her wishes in her eyes, hang upon her lips, wait for her orders…", Diderot, 1989, p. 124; Diderot, 1966, p. 72). As a consequence of this asymmetry, the subject or servant is morally corrupted; he invariably becomes dishonest and insincere as he is forced to speculate in how he can cheat and deceive. Although Pettit does not directly write about moral corruption, it is

implicit in the quotes he uses to illustrate the social and moral effects of unfreedom. Pettit quotes John Milton, who, thinking of the monarchy, describes "the perpetual *bowings* and *cringings* of an abject people" (Pettit 1997, p. 61), and also refers to *Discourses Concerning Government* (1689) whose author Algernon Sidney claimed that: "slavery doth naturally produce meanness of spirit, with its worst effect, flattery" (ibid.). Both examples show the dissimulation, falseness, and servility, in short, the moral corruption that characterises an unfree people. The nephew himself formulates the unfree person's (his own) moral characteristics as the ability to flatter, lie, commit perjury, break promises, crawl, seduce and lead into depravity – without suffering qualms of conscience.

We read many examples of the nephew's skills at flattery. He knows precisely what to say and the posture he should adopt to satisfy his master's and his mistress's vanity. At the same time, being a *flatteur* requires great ingenuity and "versatility," because neither Bertin nor his mistresses deserve praise. In addition, the flattery must show variation:

"[…] il ne faut pas toujors approuver de la même manière. On serait monotone […] il faut savoir preparer et placer ces tons majeurs et péremptoires, saisir l'occasion et le moment […] il faut être placé à l'écart, dans l'angle de l'appartement le plus éloigné du champ de bataille, avoir préparé son explosion par un long silence, et tomber subitement comme une comminge […] Personne n'a cet art comme moi […] j'ai des petits tons que j'accompagne d'un sourire; une variété infinite des mines approbatives; là le nez, la bouche, le front, les yeux entrent en jeu; j'ai une souplesse de reins; une manière de contourner l'épine du dos, de hausser ou de baisser les épaules, d'étendre les doigts, d'incliner la tête, der fermer les yeux, et d'être stupéfait, comme si j'avais entendu descendre du ciel une voix angélique et divin. C'est là ce qui flatte." (Diderot, 1989, pp. 125-126)

"[…] you mustn't always gush in the same way. It would pall […] you must know how to prepare and where to bring these peremptory tones in the major key, how to seize the occasion and the moment […] Then you must take up your position some way off in the corner of the room farthest removed from the battlefield, having prepared your explosion by a long silence, and you suddenly drop like a bomb […] Nobody has ever touched me in this art […] I have some soft notes which I accompany with a smile and an infinite variety of approving faces, with a nose, mouth, eyes and brow all brought into play. I have a certain agility with my lips, a way of twisting my spine, raising my head, shutting my eyes and being struck dumb as though I had heard an angelic, divine voice come down from heaven. That's what gets them." (Diderot, 1966, pp. 73-74)

This rather comic passage describes how the servant must have a feeling not only for the narcissism of his master or mistress, but also for the timing, dramatic structure, choreography, and effects of his own behaviour. The servant must be empathetic, sensitive, analytical, ingenuous, versatile, and a good actor too. It may seem strange that the body is emphasised to such an extent in connection with flattery, and one could ask why flattery seems to be communicated most efficiently in pantomime language. Diderot's satire does not provide any direct answer to this, but in other works Diderot writes that gesture – and thus also pantomime – has a sublime and in principle limitless meaning, because its expression cannot be translated into unequivocal content. In his writings on dramaturgy, Diderot also recommends the use of pantomime onstage, as its affective impact on the spectators is far greater than that of spoken language (Diderot, 1988, pp. 268-279). So, gesture and pantomime do not merely provide a limitless praise, they also affect the receiver on an emotional level which – one might claim – is under the radar of critical judgement.

UNFREEDOM, CORRUPTION, AND POWER

Towards the end of the dialogue, *Moi*, who would seem to have lost his illusions about patriotism and friendship, suddenly paints a picture of a society where everyone is unfree and where, consequently, everyone adopts a posture:

"Quiconque a besoin d'un autre, est indigent et prend une position. Le roi prend une position devant sa maîtresse et devant dieu; il fait son pas de pantomime. Le minister fait le pas de courtesan, de flatteur, de valet ou de gueux devant son roi […] Ma foi, ce que vous appelez la pantomime des gueux, est le grand branle de la terre. Chacun a sa petite Hus et son Bertin." (Diderot, 1989, p. 191)

"Whoever needs somebody else is necessitous and so takes up a position. The king takes up a position with his mistress and with God; he performs his pantomime step. The minister executes the movements of courtier, flatterer, flunkey or beggar in front of his king […] Good heavens, what you call the beggars' pantomime is what makes the whole world go round. Every man has his little Hus and his Bertin." (Diderot, 1966, pp. 121-122)

Everyone has desire and everyone is dependent on others to satisfy this desire. This is why everyone is unfree and why everyone stages pantomimes. What *Moi* describes is, in fact, a corrupt society, that is a society in which *all* are forced to constantly take the demands and interests of others into consideration. No one

dares to speak his honest opinion, no one dares to develop a free position, and everyone feels compelled to say something they do not mean. But the nephew knows that this dependency is experienced differently depending on one's place in the social hierarchy. His experience shows that there is a great difference between being an unfree master and being a servant. In short, unfreedom manifests itself differently in *Lui's* case and in the case of Bertin and his friends. If we first look at Bertin and the anti-philosophers, their lack of freedom shows itself in two similar ways, as mechanisation and animalisation. Several times *Lui* compares Bertin to a mechanical puppet: "[il] a l'air d'une pagoda immobile à laquelle on aurait attaché un fil menton" ("[he] looks like a motionless image with a string tied to its chin", Diderot, 1989, pp. 122-123; Diderot, 1966, p. 71). As for the anti-philosophers, they have according to *Lui* degenerated into animals, predators:

"Nous paraissons gais, mais au fond nous avons tous de l'humeur et grand appétit. Des loups ne sont pas plus affamés; des tigres ne sont pas plus cruels. Nous dévorons comme des loups, lorsque la terre a été longtemps couverte de neige; nous déchirons comme des tigres, tout ce qui réussit […] Jamais on ne vit ensemble tant de bêtes tristes, acariâtres, malfaisantes et courroucées. On n'entend que les noms de Buffon, de Duclos, de Montesquieu, de Rousseau, de Voltaire, de d'Alembert, de Diderot, et Dieu sait de quelles epithets ils sont accompagnés." (Diderot, 1989, p. 134)

"We look Jovian, but in reality we are all foul-tempered and voracious of appetite. Wolves are not more famished, tigers no more cruel. We devour like wolves when the earth has been long under snow, like tigers we tear to pieces anything successful […] Never were there seen so many wretched, spiteful, malevolent and truculent creatures in one place. You hear nothing but names such as Buffon, Duclos, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, D'Alembert, Diderot, and God knows what epithets are coupled with them." (Diderot, 1989, p. 80)

The anti-philosophers are just as controlled by their instincts as *Lui*, just as much at the mercy of their desires and vices as he is. The difference is merely that they can afford to be so. Where *Lui* must always hide his desire to achieve his goal (a seat at the dinner table), the powerful can afford not to dissemble in this respect. The *powerful* unfree person can allow himself to indulge his natural condition, his natural impulses, while the *powerless* unfree person must constantly change identity, take on new roles, and work on his apparition to accommodate the desire of the master. However, as indicated above, this situation means that the servant or the slave remains superior in a social and aesthetic sense. He is forced

to empathise with others' desires, to understand the hidden motives, the unspoken rules, the invisible hierarchy, and games of power. He must observe, understand, and be strategic.

We have now reached the point where we are able to explain why Diderot has equipped his character with this double identity of *flatteur* and musician; we are on the trail of the connection between his unfreedom and his aesthetic sensibility.

THE DEGENERATION OF SOCIETY AND THE NEW MUSIC

It has been said of Diderot's depiction of Bertin's circle (the anti-philosophers) that it appears as "une inversion du monde des salons" (Melancon 2000, p. 29). It may be viewed as a picture of the degeneration of *la bonne compagnie*. Because what *Moi* learns through *Lui's* reports from Bertin's circle is that "*les honnêtes gens"* have been replaced by "des gens de cour, des financiers, de gros commercants, des banquier, des gens d'affaires" ("court, high finance, commerce, banking, business of some kind", Diderot, 1989, p. 111; Diderot, 1966, p. 63), people who neither master the polite conversation of the salon nor live up to its social and moral ideal of self-control. Bertin's circle, however – as we saw earlier – is only a symptom of the more extensive corruption and regression of the fabric of society, as the nephew says: "Dans la nature, toutes les espèces se dévorent; toutes les conditions se dévorent dans la société. Nous faisons justice les auns des autres, sans que la loi s'en mêle" ("In nature all the species feed on each other, and all classes prey on each other in society. We mete out justice to each other without the law taking a hand", Diderot,1989, p. 111; Diderot, 1966, p. 63). No government, policy, or legislation interferes in this class warfare. Society has fallen back to a pre-political, natural state.

Why does music – opera – play such a key role in this satire about the corruption of polite society and society's general descent into a natural state? Why has Diderot created this nephew, who is both unfree and – in theory, anyway – a renewer of the opera? These questions cannot be answered within the framework of satire itself, but require an excursus on its historical context.

As a literary character, the nephew acts as a link between social satire, unfreedom, and music. Discussions of music within the satire span the nephew's criticism of French opera's tradition from Lully and Rameau, his defence of the Italian *opera buffa,* and his vision of new lyrical poetry. If we look at the satire in its historical context, there is nothing surprising in the coupling of the social and the aesthetic. Since the 17th century, "les grands," that is the Court and the

urbanised nobility, have perceived themselves as the highest judges in matters of taste, and acted accordingly. It was their social, cultural and linguistic etiquette that had been elevated to the norm in the field of art. As Jolanta T. Pekacs writes: "the criteria of honnêteté in the social realm and those of a seventeenth-century work of art based on the classical doctrine [were] difficult to separate" (Pekacs 1999, p. 279). But judging from *Le neveu de Rameau,* in the middle of the 18th century we are in a new situation. The ideals of *honnêteté* has been displaced by the egoistic and vain private interests of financiers, patrons, and their allies. In *Le neveu de Rameau* Diderot thus asks what happens to aesthetic imitation when the social segment, whose rules art must respect, is corrupted. What happens to the aesthetic norms when the social norms are no longer dictated by *honnêteté*, probity, and moderation, but by the greed of the financier and his lackeys? What art does this society generate? In the first instance, Diderot answers by having the nephew expose classical French opera as a completely anachronistic genre consisting of: "les vols, les lances, les glories, les triomphes, les victoires […] féerie […] insipide mythologie…" ("rapine, lances, gloires, triumphs and victories […] fairy-tale […] insipid mythology", Diderot, 1989, pp. 162-163; Diderot, 1966, p. 101), which, however, fortunately "est au diable […] l'Académie royale du cul-de-sac n'a que fermer boutique" ("will go to the devil and the Royal Academy in the cul-de-sac will have to shut up shop", Diderot, 1989, p.161; Diderot, 1966, p. 100), as the nephew so tersely formulates it. The days of the French opera are numbered, the audience is bored. But what should take its place? The satire gives two "answers" to this question. The first answer takes the form of a pantomime, and the second is the nephew's poetics for new lyrical poetry.

Let us observe the pantomime first of all, more precisely one of the nephew's very famous pantomimes, called "l'homme-orchestre" in the reception of Diderot. Here *Lui* mimes not only a whole orchestra, but also scenes, conflicts, situations, music, and song from a great number of French and, in particular, Italian operas. Regarding *Lui's* big orchestra or opera pantomime, performed at Café de la Regence at Palais-Royale with the audience consisting of the café's guests and random passers-by, *Moi* states:

"Il commencait à entrer en passion, et à chanter tout bas. Il élevait le ton, à mesure qu'il se passionnait advantage; vinrent ensuite, les gestes, les grimaces du visage et les contorsions du corps […] Il entassait et brouillait ensemble trente airs, italiens, français, tragiques, comiques de toutes sortes de caractères […] succesivement furieux, radouci, imperieux, ricaneur. Ici, c'est une jeune fille qui pleure et il rend toute la minauderie; là il est prêtre, il est roi, il est tyran, il menace, il commande, il s'emporte; il est esclave, il obéit […] Admi-

rais-je? Oui, j'admirais! Étais-je touché de pitié ? j'étais touché de pitié; mais une teinte de ridicule était fondue dans ces sentiments, et les dénaturait. Mais vous vous series échappé en éclats de rire, à la manière don't il contrefaisait les differrents instruments. Avec les joues renflées et bouffies, et un son rauque et sombre, il rendait les corps et les bassons […] faisant lui seul, les danseurs, les chanteurs, les chanteuses, tout un orchestre, tout un theatre lyrique, et se divisant en vingt rôles divers, courant, s'arrêtant, avec l'air d'un énergumène, étincelant des yeux, écumant de la bouche […] il pleurait, il riait, il soupirait; il regardait ou attendri, ou tranquille ou furieux; c'était une femme qui se pâme de douleur; c'était un malheureux livré à tout son désespoir…" (Diderot, 1989, pp. 166-167)

"He began to warm up and sang, first softly, then as he grew more impassioned, he raised his voice and there followed gestures, grimaces, and bodily contortions […] He sang thirty tunes on top of each other and all mixed up: Italian, French, tragic, comic, of all sorts and descriptions […] in turn raging, pacified, imperious, scornful. Here we have a young girl weeping, and he mimes all her simpering ways, there a priest, king, tyrant, threatening, commanding, flying into a rage, or a slave obeying […] Did I admire? Yes, I did. Was I touched with pity? Yes, I was. But a tinge of ridicule ran through these sentiments and discoloured them. But you would have gone off into roars of laughter at the way he mimicked the various instruments. With cheeks puffed out and a hoarse, dark tone he did the horns and bassoons […] a one-man show featuring dancers, male and female, singers of both sexes, a whole orchestra, a complete opera-house, dividing himself into twenty different stage parts, tearing up and down, stopping, like one possessed, with flashing eyes and foaming mouth […] He wept, laughed, sighed, his gaze was tender, soft or furious: a woman swooning with grief, a poor wretch abandoned in the depth of his despair…" (Diderot, 1966, pp. 102-104)

Lui's body houses an insatiable appetite but also functions as a "medium of artistic self-expression, the site of amazing and captivating visual performances" (Zalloua, 2003, p. 206). As a pantomime artist, *Lui* transforms the animal unit of body and consciousness into an artistic expression with which he creates a moment of sensus communis between himself and *Moi*. Here we are faced with the paradoxical element of the nephew's body. On the one hand it forces him into dependency and social alienation, but on the other hand it serves him as an aesthetic means of expression with which he can make a personal sense experience public through his pantomimes, that is, accessible to sensory perception for *Moi* and the other guests at Café de la Regence.

But this does not exhaust the connection between unfreedom and the aesthetic pantomime. What we see in the impact of music on the nephew is, in reality, an aesthetic counterpart or aesthetic analogy to Bertin's (and *l'appétit*'s)

domination. Music exercises the same domination over *Lui* as Bertin (and *l'appétit*) do. In both cases the body is both the source and the seat of the I's divestment of authority and self-determination – of freedom. If this divestment, this unfreedom or heteronomy, represents a moral problem in the social world (as it clearly does), it is on the other hand a source of pleasure in the field of aesthetic experience. Or, as Diderot writes with a mixture of fascination and condemnation about people with the gift of a special musical sensibility in *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*:

"En musique, le plaisir de la sensation dépend d'une disposition particulière non seulement de l'oreille, mais de tout système des nerfs. S'il y a des têtes sonnantes, il y a aussi des corps que j'appelerais volontiers harmoniques; des hommes, en qui toutes les fibres oscillent avec tant de promptitude et de vivacité, que sur l'expérience des mouvements violents que l'harmonie leur cause, ils sent la possibilité de mouvements plus violents encore et atteignent à l'idée d'une sorte de musique qui les ferait mourir de plaisir […] Ne croyez pas […] que ces êtres si sensible à l'harmonie soient les meilleurs juges de l'expression." (Diderot, 1978, p. 582)

"In music, the pleasure of the sensation depends on a particular predisposition, not only of the ear but of the entire nervous system. If we call some heads finely tuned, there are also some bodies that I'd have no trouble calling harmonic; men in whom the fibres oscillate with such promptness and liveliness that, from the experience of violent movement that harmony brings about, they sense the possibility of even more violent movements, and arrive at the idea of a kind of music that would make them die from pleasure [...] do not believe [...] that these beings who are so attuned to harmony are the best judges of expression."[4]

Before this, Diderot has compared the three art forms and pointed out that music is different from poetry and pictorial art in that it does not exhibit an object and thus does not function as an imitative art. Instead, its sounds, timbres and harmonies play directly into the body's nervous system, to the great pleasure of the music lover. Diderot's theories about the three art forms all mark a break with classicist aesthetics, but music represents a particularly radical break in that it is thought to affect the subject on a pre-linguistic and pre-reflective physical level – beyond the control of will and consciousness. *Lui* has also exhibited music's physicality in an earlier pantomime, where he mimes a musician performing a piece of music:

4 I thank Christopher Prendergast for his translation of this passage.

"[…] il se démène de la tête, des pieds, des mains, des bras, du corps. Comme vous avez vu quelquefois au concert spiritual, Ferrari ou Chiabran, ou quelque autre virtuous, dans les memes convulsions […]" (Diderot, 1989, p. 97)

"[…] head, feet, hands, arms, body, all play their part. In this very way you would have sometimes seen Ferrari or Chiabran or some other virtuoso in similar convulsions at the Concert of Sacred Music […]" (Diderot, 1966, p. 53)

The musician, as in a pantomime, constitutes "a representation of pleasure;" he is shaken by spasms, his hands move in convulsive jerks up and down the neck of the violin, and his face assumes "an expression of ecstasy." No other art form demonstrates a similar connection between the body's automatism and spirituality. On this basis it could be said that music is an art form whose aesthetic expression – whether beautiful or not – emanates from an animal and mechanical subjectivity. Interpreted through the nephew's pantomime, music thus appears to be an art form that fits with an historical situation where civilisation has fallen back into a form of natural state and where *l'honnête homme* (and *le philosophe*) have been dislodged from the social scene by courtiers, financiers, great merchants, stockbrokers, and their gang of mediocre poets and journalists. In the context of the satire, the anti-philosophers' predatory automatism functions in a way – however paradoxical it may sound – as the moral or social argument for an aesthetics that is no longer bound to *decorum*, but instead lets the body loose in a mechanical, delightful development. The nephew's various music and opera pantomimes expose what art could be in a society that has thrown off the masks of self-control and good breeding, and left itself at the mercy of its latent animal primitivism. Diderot seems to say that this constitutes a problem for society, but an opportunity for art.

Diderot, however, did not create the opera-pantomime from his imagination alone. The pantomime contains several references to the Italian *opera buffa*, which Parisians had become acquainted with between 1752 and 1754, when the Italian composer and conductor Eustachio Bambini's troupe made a guest appearance on the stage of the *Académie royale de musique*. The comic operas came as a shock to the Parisian audiences. Historians actually speak of the Italians' guest appearance as an aesthetic earthquake in dominant French taste and listening culture. The dramaturgy was completely alien; the actors used movements, grimaces, and gestures the like of which had never been seen on the academy's "noble scene," where the actors' body language was supposed to respect the requirement of propriety ("bienséance"). The Italians' appearance *had* to spark a feud – which it also did. In autumn 1752 one of these "guerre

pamphlétaire," which France was famous for at that time, broke out: *La Querelle des Bouffons*, where adherents of the Italian *opera buffa* faced adherents of the French opera, *tragédie lyrique* (Fabiano, 2005, pp. 11-12). The supporters of the Italian opera, who included all the Encyclopaedists, among others, found the Italians' physical dramaturgy liberatingly funny; opponents perceived the gestures and grimaces as inappropriate "singeries" – a scandalous degradation of the respectable Parisian opera stage. *L'opera buffa* clearly constituted a break with the doctrine of classicism, which had formed the framework of French theatre and opera since the 17th century.

Diderot's point via the nephew's pantomime could be seen as an attempt to lay bare, enlarge, and celebrate this break between *la bonne compagnie* and theatre, or opera. Simultaneously, Diderot suggests a new connection between the social world on the one hand, theatre, music, and poetic lyrics one the other. Through *Lui* and his pantomime, Diderot seems to be saying that *la bonne compagnie*, once the ideal or the norm of aesthetic imitation, has become merely an object of aesthetic depiction, or to be more precise of comic or satirical recreation. Judging from *Le neveu de Rameau*, this entails that theatre (and opera) will change radically, tragedy will be replaced by comedy and farce (like in the *opera buffa*), and heroism and *honnêtété* will have to make their way for low, simple, and primitive morals. Last, but not least, the body of the actor will be liberated from the rules of *bienséance* (decency) and become the instrument of expression – the mediator of the mechanical, animal movements, the desire, greed, and aggression that now govern society.

LYRICAL POETRY: POWER VERSUS DESIRE

If *Le neveu de Rameau* has anything new to say about unfreedom in relation to common understandings of the concept, this stems from the interlinking of music and (moral) corruption, opera and the regression of civil society, as previously mentioned. The aesthetic potential of unfreedom is to be found in this interlinking, which we shall now examine by confronting the nephew's vision for a new form of lyrical poetry (poetry that is sung, like in the opera). What is important to understand in the nephew's poetics for the new lyrical poetry is that it tackles one of the points of contention in *La Querelle des Bouffons*, namely the extent to which song in opera is superior or subordinate to the poetical verse line. In French opera, song has to adapt to the verse line; in the Italian *opera buffa,* the opposite is the case. Not surprisingly, the nephew believes in the precedence of song. But, what is song, *Moi* asks. Song is an imitation of "the cry of animal

instinct," and the nephew states that this cry must "dictate the line which suits us." An echo of the animal cry of passion can be heard in "a beggar asking for alms in the street," it can be heard in "a man in a towering rage," in a woman "mad with jealousy, a despairing lover, a flatterer – yes, a flatterer lowering his voice and dwelling on each syllable in honeyed tones" (Diderot, 1966, p. 107). Everyone has passions irrespective of rank and lineage, and the passions are apparent in the tone of voice, but at the same time the individual passions have their specific accent or tone. It is these accents that the uncle Jean-Philippe Rameau and the French opera, with its heroics and mythological universe, would seem to be deaf to:

"C'est au cri animal de la passion, à dicter la ligne qui nous convient […] il faut que la phrase soit courte; que le sens en soit coupé, suspendu; que le musician puisse disposer du tout et de chacune de ses parties; en omettre un mot, ou le repeter; y en ajouter un qui lui manqué […] Il faut que les passions soient fortes ; la tendresse du musician et du poète lyrique doit être extreme […] Il faut les exclamations, des interjections, des suspensions, des interruptions, des affirmations, des negations; nous appelons, nous invoquons, nous crions, nous gémissions, nous pleurons, nous rions franchement. Point d'esprit, point d'épigramme; point de jolie pensées. Cela est trop longue de la simple nature." (Diderot, 1989, pp. 169-170)

"It is the animal cry of passion that should dictate the melodic line […] phrases must be short and the sense cut off, suspended, so that the musician can utilize the whole and each part, omitting one word or repeating it, adding a missing word […] The passions must be strong and the sensibility of composer and poet must be very great […] What we want is exclamations, interjections, suspensions, interruptions, affirmations, negations ; we call out, invoke, shout, groan, weep or have a good laugh. No witticisms, epigrams, one of your well-turned thoughts – all that is far too removed from nature." (Diderot, 1989, p. 106)

The struggle of primitive forces against the pressure of civilisation is recreated in this violent confrontation between the animal cry of passion and the syntax of the sentence. It is these forces that the nephew has felt smouldering within himself, which he has heard echoes of in the voices of ordinary people, and, last but not least, which he has seen fully developed at Bertin's gatherings. And it is these forces that will dictate the melodic line and verse line in the new opera. The result will entail the liberation of passion, voice, and breathing from the rules of language, and from the defining, civilising shaping of thought.

The historical inseparability of the rules of polite society and art forms the background of Diderot's invention of a literary figure who masters both the social game and music, whose depiction includes how changes in the social register more or less automatically trigger changes in the aesthetic register. The moment when fashionable society is corrupted by unfreedom, the moment when the world of society is no longer governed by good manners, self-control, politeness, propriety, and the like, is the moment when the rules that dictate art are also challenged. Diderot, it seems, exploits this situation in an almost diabolical manner, as though he celebrates the corruption of polite society as the emancipation of art. When propriety, politeness, and rectitude do not exist, art does not have to conform to the respectful imitation of polite society's social and cultural ideals. Then it is freed to perform functions other than reflecting and supporting the dominant elite and the existing order. Then it can show the world in many perspectives. Then it can speak the language not only of the lord, but also of the slave.

AN AESTHETIC COUNTER-ATTACK

Let us finally return to Goethe's understanding of *Le neveu de Rameau* as a secret revenge on the anti-philosophers. It seems obvious by now that Goethe was right. In *Le neveu de Rameau,* Diderot organises a literary counter-attack against the anti-philosophers' smear campaigns by portraying them as unfree predators, and his need for retaliation seems all the more understandable given that the attacks on the *Encyclopdédie* were not without consequences for Diderot and his team of writers. The problem for the Encyclopaedists' opponents was that the censors, time and again, found *no* grounds to prohibit the articles in the *Encyclopédie,* and therefore had to resort to other, non-formalised, means of stopping its publication. As mentioned before, they came close to succeeding. In February 1752, the king issued a decree prohibiting the publication of the *Encyclopédie* (it was later revoked), and, in January 1759, the *procureur général* of the Parliament of Paris alleged that the *Encyclopédie* was part of a large-scale conspiracy aimed at undermining both church and state. In March 1759, the *Conseil d'Etat* took away the *Encyclopédie's* licence to print, and the work was placed on the *Index* together with d'Helvetius's *De l'Esprit* (1758), a hyper-materialistic work with far-reaching moral and political implications. In September 1759, Pope Clement XII faced all who possessed copies of the *Encyclopédie* with the choice of discarding the book or being excommunicated from the Catholic Church. As Robert Darnton remarks: "it was hardly possible for a book to be condemned

more completely" (Darnton, 1979, p. 12). One could say that Diderot and the other Encyclopaedists composed the *Encyclopédie* within an atmosphere of unfreedom in almost every sense of the word.

The participation of the Encyclopaedists in *La Querelle des Bouffons* (1752-1754), wherein they unanimously sided with the Italian opera, should be viewed in the light of this unfreedom. The opera feud began immediately after the king prohibited the *Encyclopédie* in February 1752, cf. above, and therefore many think that the Encyclopaedists' participation in the feud was an attempt to counter royal prohibition. Their political indignation at *l'ancien regime*'s restrictions on freedom of thought and the press is thus transposed to an aesthetic critique of the French opera which – as formulated by Rousseau – was defended by "the great, the wealthy and the ladies" (Pekacz, 1999, p. 287).

Nor is Diderot's satire only directed at the factions that combated the *Encyclopédie* on ideological and personal grounds. Through references to the *Querelle des Bouffons*, the satire attacks the political order in *l'ancien regime*. The buffoon feud, as it appears, is not merely over the social side of taste, but also over its national political implications. As Elizabeth Cook writes, since the opera's introduction to France it had functioned as "an overt celebration of absolutism; enthusiasm for a rival, foreign style [as Italian opera] assumed a deeper symbolism […] threatening the fabric of Ancien Régime at the mid-point of the century" (in Fabiano 2005, p. 147). The Italians' entry into the French cultural institution, known as an incarnation of royal authority and absolutist cultural policy, thus presented an obvious occasion to air criticism of *l'ancien regime* and the influence of certain powerful groups on the cultural institutions of the regime.

As editor, Diderot could not afford to counter the assaults that the anti-philosophers launched on the *Encyclopédie*, his team of writers, and his person. His enemies were too powerful. To a certain point this inequality in power appears analogous to the "bloody awful economy" to which the Nephew refers at the end of the dialogue when he complains that

"[q]ue diable d'économie, des hommes qui regorgent de tout, tandis que d'autres qui ont un estomac importune comme eux, une faim renaissante comme eux, et pas de quoi mettre sous la dent. *Le pis, c'est la posture contrainte où nous tient le besoin*." (Diderot, 1989, p. 189)

"some men bursting with everything, while others, with stomachs just as clamorous and a hunger just as unremitting, have nothing to get their teeth into. *The worst thing is the subservient posture in which you are kept by need*." (Diderot, 1966, p. 120)

Diderot was also in a somewhat subservient position, since the cost of expressing his honest opinion on the anti-philosophers, the king, court, and parliament in all likelihood would have been persecution or imprisonment. With Pettit, we could say that he was forced constantly to take the opinions, moves, and intrigues of others into consideration; hence he lived in a situation of domination. However, in this subservient position and all secrecy, he produced a literary work considered to be among the most audacious, vigorous, and progressive texts of French 18th century literature.

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