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“LIKE ME”
Mimesis and Dramaturgic Play in Early Childhood¹

Abstract

Mimesis is an innate feature of human beings. It manifests immediately after birth and constitutes a very early form of learning, substantiating interpersonal relationships, fostering empathy, and facilitating self-awareness, together with many practical and operative notions, through mirroring oneself in the significant other. The mimetic dimension evolves into fictional and symbolic ludic forms, which we have called dramaturgic, and which constitute a crucial socio-relational and cultural resource in infants' development. These findings, backed by numerous studies, prove the need for a new attention to subjectivity in the education of pre-school children.

From an operational viewpoint, these considerations offer countless cues for drawing new hypotheses about the pedagogical function of theatrical practices to support the development of young children individually and in groups. Specifically, using field research conducted among toddlers in a nursery, the paper establishes the hypothesis that direct theatrical practice, following precise methodical guidelines, accompanies and fosters the natural evolution of mimetic dynamics into dramaturgic play. It does so by developing the children's ability to creatively rework their experiences through the co-construction of imaginary worlds and their bodily and kinetic experiences. Direct theatrical practice also facilitates the growth of abstract thinking and nurtures pro-social and cooperative behaviours.

Keywords

Early childhood; toddlerhood; mimesis; dramaturgic play; relationship; social theatre workshop.

L'atto mimico essenziale è sentire ciò che vedi come volto.

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In order to fully appreciate the characteristics of pre-school children, we ought to try to leave behind us the socio-cultural paradigm that considers childhood simply the ante-

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² “The essential mimic act is to perceive what you see as a face”. M. Boggio, *Il corpo creativo. La parola e il gesto in Orazio Costa*, Roma: Bulzoni, 2001, 117.

chamber of adulthood, devoid of its own independent statutory peculiarity³. A careful observation of children as subjects of their own “here and now” existence reveals, however, a surprisingly organised way of life, be it conscious or unconscious. As proven by the many research contributions analysed in this article, pre-school children are able to establish and improve relationships with others, to develop their learning holistically, to modify themselves in order to adapt to their contexts in many creative and unexpected ways, and, finally, to preserve and restore their own well-being whenever necessary. These are all tendencies that can be easily noticed and should form a solid base for co-operation between the various educational agencies in charge of children development⁴.

To this aim, we believe that theatrical practices, and, above all, the continuum of experiences that span from mimesis⁵ to dramatic play, offer many operative and methodological tools that will be the object of this paper.

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF A THEATRE WORKSHOP IN A “TODDLER” NURSERY SCHOOL IN MILAN

Our analysis of the relationship between mimesis, dramatic play and development of social competences originates from a theatre workshop held in the *Sezione Primavera* (Toddler section) of a Nursery School in the city of Milan⁶. The Toddler sections have been recently introduced within the state school system to cater for children aged 24 to 36 months, and require the presence of a team of three Nursery Teachers, two of whom specialised in Toddlers and one specialised in Infants⁷. The workshop highlighted the distinctive aspects of this newly introduced set-up that actively promote relational learning.

The first one concerns the relational and expressive possibilities that the significant adults, in this instance the Trainer and two Nursery Teachers, offer to the children through a high level of physical engagement in play.

During our workshop, both children and educators have the opportunity to actively

³ On childhood as a social construction, see: C. Jenks, *Childhood*, London-New York: Routledge, 1996 and his methodological synthesis *Constructing Childhood Sociologically*, in M.J. Kehily, ed., *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, UK: Open University Press, 2009, 93-111. On children as active players in social and cultural construction, see: W. Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood*, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1997, Italian translation *Le culture dei bambini*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2003.

⁴ E. Baumgartner, A.S. Bombi, *Bambini insieme. Intrecci e nodi delle relazioni tra pari in età prescolare*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005, 9-15.

⁵ In this article we will use the term mimesis to indicate a process not limited to the pure imitation of an object by a subject, but requiring a representation, a composition, a process of symbolic mediation and a creative interaction, as clarified by B. Rasmussen, “Beyond Imitation and Representation: Extended Comprehension of Mimesis in Drama Education”, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 13, 3 (2008): 307-319.

⁶ The experience, observed directly in the field and recorded on tape, was conducted by a researcher with a specific social theatre training (from now on indicated as the Trainer). The school is situated in a working class neighbourhood, with a high percentage of multi-ethnic families at risk of social exclusion. The workshop took place between April and May 2014 and consisted of six 45 minutes sessions, involving 19 children, divided into two groups, and two Nursery Workers.

⁷ “To combine two categories of professionals means to build an integrated team to cater for a transitional age, focusing not only on the children’s needs (care, well-being, independence) but also on their potential (logical, linguistic and relative to learning); furthermore, not separating care and learning but seeing them as two interacting components of children’s development. The *Sezione Primavera* covers the gap between Infant and Early Years and is based upon the highest pedagogic quality, flexibility and originality of organisational solutions”. Accessed 01/05/2016, http://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/it/servizi/educazione/servizi_0-6_anni/sezioni%20primavera.

experiment their own motor, expressive and relational competences. The adults, enacting what is required of the children, create the conditions for them to explore their capabilities. By imitating the Trainer, the little ones extend their range of perception and action with new gestures, movements and sounds: for example the Trainer breaks up the flight of the dragon into simple segments to enable the children to copy step by step (they open up the strong, long wings, they lift their tails up to guide them through the sky, they turn their face left and right to gaze into the horizon...). The smaller the bits of action and the more descriptive the words that accompany them, the easier it is for the children to replicate them. The voice helps to concentrate the children's attention on what the Trainer is showing, and even more on what their peers are doing. When the Trainer stands still, the focus of imitation shifts to the interactions between the children themselves, especially those who initially have found it more difficult to do as they were told: the Trainer holds a stick with many coloured strings attached, representing the tails of the dragon. One child dares to approach and touch it. The next child follows him with his eyes. Only after the first child has touched the tails several times, the second child moves closer and shyly touches the stick.

On a different occasion, the Trainer asks the children to rearrange some small rugs on the floor in order to sit on them. The majority of the children do as they are told instinctively. One, nevertheless, has to watch carefully his peers before he understands what is required and only then he performs the task in turn.

Imitation is not, however, a passive undertaking for the children. By imitating, they transform and own the actions that they perform, creating something new, which speaks both of the object that is being imitated and of the subject who imitates. The Trainer tells the children to warm their hands up in order to brood the dragon's egg, and in doing so she makes a rhythmic sound, *tuc... tuc... tuc*. She opens and shuts her hand imitating a bird's beak. One of the children, struck by the rhythm, repeats the gesture and transforms it in a short dance, moving his hands in the air and closing his thumb and index fingers. What has happened is that the evocative dramaturgic structures have made it possible for the child to reinvent the process, transforming him from actor into author.

The narrative frames represent the second distinctive element of the theatrical experience: by structuring the make-believe dimension of "what-if", the Trainer opens the possibility for the children to intervene in the symbolic construction of the game. Sometimes invention and creation are not limited to the verbal sphere but they happen in the here-and-now of physical action: while the children are mimicking bears scratching their backs, the Trainer notices one child who, sitting on the floor, is swivelling on his bottom. Following the Trainer's suggestion, all the children observe him and start spinning themselves, finding it very amusing to be like top-spinners. On other occasions, the children offer a proper counter-imitation. The invention of a new gesture is introduced by the children with a "No", which underlines the discrepancy between the adult's request and the action that the child wants to do: when the Trainer imitates the flight of the dragon, all children, in various ways, imitate her. But when the dragon dives and starts to swim, a child rejects the adult's gesture, saying: "No! They swim like this!" and so the adult starts imitating him. In a different sequence, a girl refuses the Trainer's suggestion and proposes to "be angry dogs" instead. She wants to experiment with an aggressive action and the other children want it too. After a few moments, the Trainer asks them to be little birds. The group, tired of the aggressive behaviour, follows her lead. The girl, however, raises the stakes, as she wants to carry on: "No! Let's be tigers!". As nobody follows her, she quietly becomes a little bird. The Trainer wraps the episode up from a narrative point of view: "Look, the tigers are over there, they cannot reach us, we are too high. We are safe up here. Come

on, let's go back to our nest". All the children go back to their rugs. This example shows how easily the children, within the framework of the dramaturgic play, can shift between different roles and patterns of behaviour and manage the relational changes that ensue. It is usually the most enterprising among the children who act upon such episodes, where the proposed action implies a relationship with peers. It is essential however to remember that the relational dimension at this age is still minimal. The activities proposed by children to their peers are still very short and end momentarily, unless they are re-launched by the adult managing the group. In some instances, the imitation is re-enacted afterwards: one more introverted and less physically active girl, who was very attentive, re-proposes one of her peers' gestures at a much later time. She does so at the side, when the action has already moved on to something else.

The children's ability to become authors, within the framework of a given dramaturgic action, can stretch to apply to the rules used by the Trainer to play the game: they are in the savannah, and a boy suggests they can be zebras, but no one knows how a zebra walks. The group is at a standstill. A girl proposes to be dogs: in the action, some boys become quite aggressive, and the group follows their lead. The girl who has proposed to pretend to be dogs starts meowing and says "Cats!". While she walks like a cat she stops and asks the Trainer: "And now?", and she answers herself: "And then they smell something". Another child sniffing says: "I do smell something!". The girl, still moving like a cat, stops and asks the Teacher: "What smell is this?". To be able to grasp and seize the rules of the game constitutes an additional significant element of experimentation, during the dramaturgic play, of new relational dynamics.

It is useful to notice how significant the presence of the educators has been in these experiences. During one session, a girl, who does not feel up to proposing to the group, offers her statement to the Teacher: "There is a panther!", and runs in the opposite direction. Another girl, taking a string of feathers, puts it around a Teacher's neck and says: "Let's make a necklace!". Another girl observes her and imitates her action. In the meantime, the first girl has started making a bracelet around the Teacher's wrist saying: "No, it is a bracelet!". A third child, a boy, after careful consideration, gets nearer and puts a string around the Teacher's neck. The possibility of experiencing positive interactions is strictly correlated to the way in which the adults play their role. The figures involved do not limit themselves to being role models who give boundaries and structure to the dramaturgic play: they also act as mediators between the big group and the individual children, who feel therefore reassured, and as stimulators of mutual observation, creating situations where the children can train their ability to interact in the real world with other people.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MIMESIS IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT. BODILY EXPERIENCE AS THE BASE FOR INTERSUBJECTIVITY

During our workshop we observed several mimetic behaviours, both between children and adults and among the children themselves. We thought these behaviours were rich sources of developmental resources. While we do not want in any way to minimise the valuable contributions of developmental psychology to explain the formation of child identity during infancy, we would like to focus our attention on mimesis, trying to ascertain its role in child development and how it evolves into dramaturgic play, if stimulated by theatrical activity. Mimetic behaviour is an incredibly early and fundamental feature of human life, as it has been established that as soon as 42 minutes after birth a new-

born baby can imitate actions. Several trials have proven that these are not mere reflex actions, and they do not disappear after the first few months of life, but last, amidst other forms of interaction⁸. This demonstrates that imitation presents itself as an innate condition of humans, who are born inept, contrary to other animals, and learn through complex procedures of adaptation, defence, transformation: all intrinsically cultural mechanisms⁹. Imitation, besides trial and error learning and autonomous invention and discovery, has a key role in modifying infant behaviour during its process of growth and development¹⁰. Meltzoff reports that children are careful observers of peer and adult behaviour, and imitate their actions and can later reproduce them from memory in different contexts¹¹. This process results in what he calls an “active intermodal mapping”¹², by which the acts of the infant copying adults are reverberated by a proprioceptive feedback loop, allowing him to tune mimetically in to what he observes. In other words, the infant watches an action being acted by someone else, and by imitating it, he reproduces it and feels it through his own bodily movements. This allows him to represent the other as “like me”¹³.

Another precocious characteristic, appearing as early as at 6 weeks of age, is the infant’s peculiar interest in being imitated by others, as he perceives the structural congruence between himself and the relevant other who enters into relationship with him. “What we have discovered is that, even for the youngest human being, mirroring behaviour is a significant and emotionally pleasant event”¹⁴. Furthermore, the child adopts an “intentional perspective”, being able to detect the other’s intention beyond the actual performance of the act itself. This ability to interpret the others’ actions is amplified whenever he has already experienced a similar experience himself¹⁵. In brief, one can argue that the individual human being, since the earliest age, builds a sort of bridge between himself and the others, establishing relationships thanks to his “like me” dimension, which derives from bodily imitation.

Different and somehow critical but equally important, are the findings derived from the neurological research of the last few years, namely those relating to the functionalities of mirror neurons. Recent studies have demonstrated that the observation of others’ actions produces in the human brain the same motor description as the performance of the same action, thus enabling the observer to give meaning to information received from observation and to recognise it¹⁶. The actions of others are understood in connection with one’s own body, as a result of an automatic form of embodied simulation,

⁸ A.N. Meltzoff, M.K. Moore, “Early Imitation Within a Functional Framework: The Importance of Person Identity, Movement, and Development”, *Infant Behavior and Development*, 15 (1992): 479-505.

⁹ J. Bruner, “Nature and Uses of Immaturity”, in K. Connolly, J. Bruner, eds., *The Growth of Competence*, London-New York: Academic Press, 1974, 11-48.

¹⁰ A.N. Meltzoff, “L’infanzia della mente: ciò che i bambini ci insegnano su noi stessi”, in P. Donghi, a cura di, *Aree di contagio*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000, 43-64.

¹¹ Even Piaget, despite not admitting imitation’s relevance before the 18th month of life, acknowledged its importance at a later stage of child development, especially when it appears as deferred imitation at around two years of age, together with the emergence of symbolic behaviour. See J. Piaget, *La formation du symbole chez l’enfant*, Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé 1946, It. transl. *La formazione del simbolo*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1972.

¹² Meltzoff, “L’infanzia della mente: ciò che i bambini ci insegnano su noi stessi”, 56-60.

¹³ A.N. Meltzoff, “Imitation and Other Minds: The ‘Like Me’ Hypothesis”, in S. Hurley, N. Chater, eds., *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*, Vol. 2, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2005, 57.

¹⁴ Meltzoff, “L’infanzia della mente”, 55.

¹⁵ Id., “Imitation and Other Minds”, 66-69.

¹⁶ P.F. Ferrari, S. Rozzi, “Neuroni specchio, azione e relazione. Il cervello che agisce come fundamenta

happening at a pre-linguistic and pre-rational stage, which has important cognitive and relational consequences¹⁷. The neuronal structure validates the belief that the human mind begins as a “shared mind”, based on the mirror neurons definition of space as “we-centric”; later the child acquires the ability to distinguish himself from others, provided he develops sensory-motor self-control. The shared we-centric space, typical of children from a very early age, is crucial to create his social links, and is also central in the process of identity formation and distinction between self and other. The latter distinction emerges from the identification with the other, perceived at a very deep level as “like me”, which in turn allows sharing elements of the social life, and develops in relation to the body and the environment¹⁸.

The most recent neuroscientific findings provide an empirically based notion of interpersonal relations as intercorporeality – the “mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensory-motor behaviours”¹⁹, originating from the interpersonal nature of human behaviour, primary source of knowledge about the other. The discovery of the bodily nature of the human mind, the bodily mind, proves the impossibility of having mental contents without physical experiences, pointing to language being an experience partly projected over the sensory-motor dimension²⁰. Speech can be interpreted as an anthropogenic act overcoming contingencies and expressing the human vocation to make all meanings general²¹. Its nature would indeed be to “allow one to go beyond the body while remaining anchored to it, as typical of embodied simulation”²². This ontological opening of the human being to the other human being is determined by the fact that the other is a constituent of the inner self, is given like one’s self. The self and the other are “intimately intertwined because of the embodied simulation linking them” and mimesis is one of the main expressions of this constitutive openness to others²³. The actions and behaviours of the children we met during our theatre workshop have proven so, as they manifested their mimetic inclination bending it in many different directions, according to the Trainer’s prompts. The directions taken were several: sometimes it was immediate imitation, as reproduction of acts; in other instances it was deferred imitation; sometimes imitation and non-imitation were ways to express oneself, one’s own need and desire. Imitation has been explored to its outer boundaries, where the mimicry opens itself to its transformation, both in relation to the execution of the other’s acts, and in relation to counter-imitation, when the child rejects the cues received by the Trainer and affirms his own authorship, turning into the object of imitation.

della mente sociale”, *Rivista sperimentale di freniatria: la rivista dei servizi di salute mentale*, 136, 1 (2012): 24-26.

¹⁷ V. Gallese, “Dai neuroni specchio alla consonanza intenzionale. Meccanismi neurofisiologici dell’intersoggettività”, *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, 53, 1 (2007): 197-208; V. Gallese, “Mirror Neurons, Embodied Simulation, and the Neural Basis of Social Identification”, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19 (2009): 519-536.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 530.

¹⁹ V. Gallese, “Corpo non mente. Le neuroscienze cognitive e la genesi di soggettività ed intersoggettività”, in *Educazione Sentimentale*, 20, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2013, 12.

²⁰ A. Glenberg, V. Gallese, “Action-Based Language: A Theory of Language Acquisition, Comprehension, and Production”, in S. Cappa, F. Pulvermüller, eds., *Language and the Motor System*, “Cortex”, 48 (July-August 2012): 905-922.

²¹ Gallese, “Corpo non mente”, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.

²³ V. Gallese, “Le due facce della mimesi. La Teoria Mimetica di Girard, la simulazione incarnata e l’identificazione sociale”, *Psicobiettivo*, 2, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009, 94.

3. MIMETIC EXPERIENCE AND PROCESSES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION

As we have noted, the children’s mimetic behaviours during the workshop always appear to be ways to open themselves up to the others, adults and children alike: they are means to the end of establishing relationships. During the last century many studies have been conducted on the relational processes in early childhood, mainly highlighting two aspects: on the one hand, the role of model of the primary bonding between mother and child²⁴; and on the other hand, due to the growing attention lent to the complexity of multiple connections, the importance of the social network, so that “the causes of children’s behaviour and development reside in the structure of the social system as much as in his past experiences”²⁵. Both these relational systems, the vertical and the horizontal one, are of paramount importance in the social training of pre-schoolers. They experience, in their wider social network, a great complexity of relationships, among which the most important ones are peer-to-peer relationships, given the amount of time spent daily in interaction.

Children as young as one year old start to show preferences for other children, and between 3 and 6 years of age they build up true friendships, which can have positive effects on their development, but can also cause developmental problems, if they show high levels of conflict and rejection within the age group²⁶. The benefits of having friends are both cause and effect of increased social competence, as the context of amical relationships facilitates and develops this competence, together with an increased awareness of oneself, of the others and of the environment. Reciprocal relationships foster emotional and cognitive abilities, which will shape future relational models²⁷. In amical relationships, mimesis interacts with the other complex relational strategies that influence the dynamics of belonging and rejection²⁸. Early friendships are based on mirroring mechanisms through the general search of similarity in peers. Initially, it is similarity in social abilities that is required; at a later age, gender similarities acquire more importance (probably because of shared preferences for activities and interactions), as well as similar ethnic origin and comparable levels of aggressive behaviour.

Children’s group experiences are the subject of extensive observation by the adults, but they are also clearly perceived and processed by the children themselves. Similarities between group members are the main aggregation tool, besides differentiation from other groups. Internal activities, as our theatre workshop clearly displayed, can be broadly divided into cohesive ones, expressed through affiliative behaviours, and

²⁴ Bibliography on this topic is extensive; for general reference, see: K. Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1947; M. Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis. 1921-1945*, London: The Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1948, It. transl. in *Scritti 1921-1958*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1978; D. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, London: Penguin Books, 1964, It. transl. *Il bambino, la famiglia e il mondo esterno*, Roma: Magi, 2005 and J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. I, *Attachment*, New York: Basic, 1969, It. transl. *L’attaccamento alla madre*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989.

²⁵ M. Lewis, “La rete sociale e le relazioni multiple”, in M.L. Genta, ed., *La socializzazione in età prescolare: competenze e percorsi evolutivi*, Milano: Carocci, 2005, 27.

²⁶ P.K. Smith, C. Monks, “L’amicizia e il gioco tra i coetanei in età prescolare”, in Genta, ed., *La socializzazione in età prescolare*, 57-77; J. Dunn, *Children’s Friendship. The Beginnings of Intimacy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, It. transl. *L’amicizia tra i bambini. La nascita dell’intimità*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006, 84-113 and 137-163.

²⁷ B. Laursen, W.W. Hartup, “The Origins of Reciprocity and Social Exchange in Friendships”, *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 95 (2002): 27-40.

²⁸ Smith, Monks, “L’amicizia e il gioco tra i coetanei in età prescolare”, 68-74.

divisive ones, giving rise to competition and breakdowns of communication²⁹. Within the group, the children model their behaviour on their peers' behaviour, as they perceive them as similar, and want to be like them. It is worth mentioning that the assimilation pressure can be sparked by different characteristics, such as gender differences: groups of boys and girls differ for activity types, for interaction models, and for the formation of subgroups and structured or unstructured hierarchies³⁰. Hierarchy within the group regulates relationships among group members using two main directives: ranking of dominance, based on the high status acquired by certain members through some traits (age, height, power, generosity, intelligence, social skillfulness...) that mitigate any aggressive and divisive pushes; and ranking of attention, where the social status of children is determined by the attention they receive from others, which makes them worthy of imitation³¹. It appears clearly that social dynamics in children's groups are not casual, but selective; they are manipulated by some individuals more than others, and peculiar to each group. They create a real social ecology, typical of the particular group and producing interactional qualities that are structural to it.

On the one hand, there are identification processes, a common condition pushing the children towards grouping; on the other hand, being in a group reinforces the integration processes giving the sense of belonging to a community and working through individual deviation-reducing actions, such as "irony, sarcasm, estrangement from the group"³². As interactions clearly cannot always run smoothly towards amical reciprocity and inclusion, they sometimes give origin instead to unilateral friendships and to different presence modes in the peer group³³. These conditions may have different causes: cognitive impairment, differences in social competence, inadequate sociability, relational inhibitions; regardless of their cause, they are, however, a troubling feature revealed by social studies as they tend to consolidate into social statuses during youth and to last into adulthood. This is particularly true of the figure of the rejected, born from aggressive behaviour and social isolation, with greatly negative consequences for the child³⁴.

4. MIMESIS AND DRAMATURGIC PLAY

Mimetic peer pressure has a critical weight in children's socio-affective experience, influencing, positively and negatively, the dynamic formation of their subjectivity. One

²⁹ E. Baumgartner, "Gli scenari della relazione tra i pari: il gruppo", in Baumgartner, Bombi, *Bambini insieme*, 25-48; A.J. Santos, B.E. Vaughn, K.K. Bost, "Specifying Social Structures in Preschool Classrooms: Descriptive and Functional Distinctions between Affiliative Subgroups", *Acta Ethologica*, 11 (2008): 101-113.

³⁰ C. Leaper, C.K. Friedman, "The Socialization of Gender", in J.E. Grusec, P.D. Hastings, *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, New York: Guilford Publications, 2007, 561-587.

³¹ Baumgartner, "Gli scenari della relazione tra i pari: il gruppo", 30-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ A. Di Norcia, "Destini sociali", in Baumgartner, Bombi, *Bambini insieme*, 118-124. The author underlines that the vast majority of children within a group of peers find themselves in middle ground between being chosen and rejected, as they are "in the middle". Then there are the "popular" kids, those who have a highly positive social impact, and the "rejected", with a highly negative social impact; those who are "controversial", that is loved and hated at the same time, and finally the "neglected", who are frequently overlooked.

³⁴ C. Zappulla, A. Lo Coco, "L'isolamento sociale nell'infanzia", *Psicologia clinica dello sviluppo*, 3 (2000); R.E. Tremblay, D.S. Nagin, "The Developmental Origins of Physical Aggression in Humans" (83-106) and M. Boivin, F. Vitaro, F. Poulin, "Peer Relationships The Development of Aggressive Behavior in Early Childhood" (376-397), both in R.E. Tremblay, W. Hartup, J. Archer, eds., *Developmental Origins of Aggression*, New York: Guilford Press, 2005.

of the most alarming social deviations of mimetic processes is the conflict of mimetic rivalry between subjects who end up competing for the same object only because it is desired by others, to the point of committing violent acts just to seize the target of such competition. Furthermore, desire can push the mimetic action beyond the seizure of the object, to the annihilation of the rival, culminating in the effort to destroy him, and has the potential to reach the point of spreading uncontrolled violence in the social body³⁵. Thanks to our theatre workshop, we were able to observe some instinctive mimetic strategies in the children’s behaviour, which were alternative responses to the violent consequences of the desire to possess. These are mimetic conducts, solicited by the Trainer’s operational proposals, transformed in fictional and symbolic sense, giving rise to pro-social and collaborative behaviours. This leads us to formulate the hypothesis that the dramaturgic development of mimetic behaviour represents a crucial resource for children and ought therefore to be sustained in their growth and education.

The main thing shared by two little friends is make-believe: pretend play, invented stories, fictional actions, heroes and baddies. In one word, first friendships are the “Open Sesame” towards possible worlds³⁶.

In this annotation, Bruner gathers the two aspects together: on one side, the importance of peer relations, and on the other side, the value of play and particularly of fictional play. The central role of play in children and human development in general is universally acknowledged and shared³⁷; play is the principal tool for the child to satisfy his social needs while being at the same time a real process of self-education³⁸. Symbolic play proves to be the best social experience for the child, giving him the opportunity to mimic people, environments, objects and at the same time to transform them through his representation which is in the first place bodily and only secondarily verbal³⁹. This representation can involve one or more children, and in both cases it entails establishing relationships with the different roles that the child plays and with the partners with whom he interacts within the game. From this point on, we will refer to this type of play as dramaturgic play, both to emphasise its characteristic role in child development and to prevent any possible terminology inaccuracy. We do not refer to a form of play derived from a text or script; we make reference to dramaturgy as the creation of a coherent plot of entwined meanings, which invests and defines the components of an experiential field and their relationships: the subjects, the objects, the corporeality and the movement, the words, the spaces, the rhythms and the times, the relationships, the narrative frames, the imaginary worlds, the bond, the roles and their duties, the norms and the values, the group and communal experiences and the festive dimension⁴⁰. We define dramaturgic

³⁵ R. Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fraguère, 1961, It. transl. *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca*, Milano: Bompiani, 1965.

³⁶ J. Bruner, Foreword to J. Dunn, *Children’s Friendship*, VIII-IX.

³⁷ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* [1939], Milano: Einaudi, 2002; C. Wulf, “Le basi mimetiche, performative e rituali del gioco”, in *EDUCAZIONE. Giornale di pedagogia critica*, 3, 2 (2014): 41-64. Accessed 07/01/2016. <http://www.giornaledipedagogiacritica.it/index.php/gdpc/article/download/67/66>.

³⁸ D. Guizzon, *Il gioco del teatro nella scuola dell’infanzia*, Gussago (BS): Vannini Editrice, 2010, 60.

³⁹ Dunn, *Children’s Friendship*, 36-56; E. Baumgartner, *Il gioco dei bambini*, Roma: Carocci, 2002, 50-78.

⁴⁰ S. Dalla Palma, “Momenti e modelli della transizione teatrale”, in C. Bernardi, B. Cuminetti, S. Dalla Palma, eds., *I fuoriscena. Esperienze e riflessioni sulla drammaturgia nel sociale*, Milano: Euresis Edizioni, 2000, 9-23.

games all individual or group activities of children where what is experienced and all its components acquire a value and a meaning different from the ordinary one thanks to its imaginary, fictional and symbolic reinvention.

Ludic activities in the child's experience develop gradually from a relational, cognitive, imaginative and moral point of view, finding their true fulfillment in dramaturgic play, an evolution that does not delete but encompasses all previous stages⁴¹. For example, before the appearance of proper ludic dramaturgic actions, there is a transitional phase when imitation acquires a fundamental role in the evolution of the structures of play, in particular of playing with objects. It would be difficult indeed for children to understand the conventional function of objects based only on the object itself. It is only through the observation and imitation of the actions of adults or more proficient children that the child approaches himself to dramaturgic play and starts using the objects "as if" they were in their normal, real situation⁴². Even rituality, that is the identical repetition of ordinary actions, extrapolated from their ordinary contexts, is a crucial step towards dramaturgic play⁴³. The child's attitude towards reality changes gradually, and his mimetic and realistic behaviour is likewise enriched, becoming decentralised and decontextualized, thanks to the awareness of being in a fictional dimension; and subsequently becoming combined and hierarchical, thanks to the integration process which links distinct objects, roles and actions to a common theme⁴⁴. Dramaturgic play is therefore above all transformative of one's self and of the other, from a personal as well as social and physical environment point of view. Within the activities of the child during dramaturgic play, cognitive and emotional development processes take place as well as interpersonal and problem solving processes. Research into the relational dimension of this type of play have highlighted several aspects: acquisition of other perspectives through the point of view of the role interpreted, interpretation of different roles, empathy, communication to others of feelings and thoughts, problem and conflict solving⁴⁵. Thus playing and exploiting his affective knowledge, the child explores his relationships with the world and those who inhabit it, and uses both his mimetic and creative competences⁴⁶. In re-creating the world around himself, the child uses a procedure of reinvention that gives him the possibility of "experiencing the new within the given"⁴⁷. It is thanks to this process that dramaturgic play integrates the mimetic dimension with new and creative ways to relate to reality and these foster the onset of abstract thinking, characterised by the possibility of thinking the object without the need to experience it physically⁴⁸; the development of social dynamics through the sharing of ludic dramaturgies made up of

⁴¹ G.G. Fein, "Play and Development", in V.J. Dindjian, ed., *Play's Place in Public Education for Young Children*, National Education Association of the United States, 1992; C. Garvey, *Il gioco: l'attività ludica come apprendimento*, Roma: Armando, 2009.

⁴² Baumgartner, *Il gioco dei bambini*, 43-47.

⁴³ Piaget, *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant*.

⁴⁴ Baumgartner, *Il gioco dei bambini*, 52-64; C. Garvey, *Il gioco*, Torino: Armando, 1979, 118ff.

⁴⁵ S.W. Russ, *Pretend Play in Childhood: Foundation of Adult Creativity*, Baltimore: United Book Press, 2014, 24.

⁴⁶ S. Smilansky, *The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children*, New York: Wiley, 1968.

⁴⁷ A. Bondioli, *Gioco e educazione*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006, 194.

⁴⁸ L. S. Vygotskij, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process*, edited by M. Cole, S. Scribner, V. John-Steiner, E. Soubberman, Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1978, It. transl. *Il processo cognitivo*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987, 135-152.

body, action, roles, co-construction of imaginary worlds⁴⁹; and finally the re-elaboration of the experience of need through symbolic substitution and through the exercise of the imaginary world co-created during the play⁵⁰. The imaginary framework contains and regulates the expression of emotions without preventing the exploration of their emotional meaning⁵¹.

The natural evolution of child mimetic dynamics seems to be the possibility to process desire through dramaturgic invention, using the bodily, imaginative, symbolic and relational registers; this substitutes and at the same time discloses what is absent and allows the transformation of the subjective interior experience, turning it from a condition of lack, passivity and discomfort, into an experience of actorship and authorship, based on sharing the merriment⁵² and amical intimacy⁵³.

The question arises at this point if this predisposition can be trained and how.

Two conditions tend to characterize successful training. First, an adult actively interacts with the children, and second, the adult's interaction involves behavioural techniques or themes appropriated to sociodramatic play⁵⁴.

It is therefore crucial that all adults influential in the education and development of children foster the pro-social inclinations and the interpretative reproduction praxis⁵⁵ which emerge in peer to peer interactions and particularly in ludic dramaturgic activities, facilitating the children's cognitive, socio-affective and emotional growth⁵⁶. The challenge is to create and develop activities able to nurture these dispositions with pedagogic intentionality, paying great attention to the fact that if tasks and toys have been

conceived for individual use, the children seize them and this competitive appropriation is later observed in interactions with peers. If the toys and activities are conceived for a communal use, the children develop sharing and cooperative experiences with their peers⁵⁷.

Towards this aim must strive any theatrical activity with pre-school children as it connects reality and representation, being ludic, bodily and relational action, which feeds language, imaginary and “what if”, and is in turn fed by them. It is a bridge between “embodied” and “liberated”⁵⁸ simulations and facilitates their intertwining, drawing to-

⁴⁹ Dunn, *Children's Friendship*, 33-78.

⁵⁰ S. Dalla Palma, “Gioco e teatro nell'orizzonte simbolico”, *Comunicazioni sociali*, 7, 2/3 (1985): 37-55; Id., *La scena dei mutamenti*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2001, 21-54.

⁵¹ G.G. Fein, “Pretend Play in Childhood: An Integrative Review”, *Child Development*, 52, 4 (1981): 1095-1118; P.H. Harris, *The Work of Imagination*, 2000, It. transl. *L'immaginazione nel bambino*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2008, 11-133.

⁵² Dalla Palma, *La scena dei mutamenti*, 28-33.

⁵³ Dunn, *Children's Friendship*, 70-76.

⁵⁴ Fein, “Pretend Play in Childhood”, 1107.

⁵⁵ Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood*, 141-166.

⁵⁶ Baumgartner, Bombi, *Bambini insieme*, 13-23; E. Baines, P. Blatchford, P. Kutnick, “Pupil Grouping for Learning: Developing a Social Pedagogy of the Classroom”, in R.M. Gillies, A.F. Ashman, J. Terwel, *The Teacher's Role in Implementing Cooperative Learning in the Classroom*, New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2008, 56-72; K.H. Rubin, W.M. Bukowski, B. Laursen, eds., *Handbook of Peer Interactions, Relationships, and Groups*, New York-London: Guilford Press, 2009, 589-621.

⁵⁷ P. Kutnick, “La competenza sociale dei bambini e il lavoro di gruppo”, in Genta, ed., *La socializzazione in età prescolare*, 84.

⁵⁸ “I spoke about “liberated simulation” as a characteristic trait of the experience we have when contemplating a work of art. Through the distance from reality produced by artistic creation, both in generating new worlds reassembling the elements of the visible domain, and when thanks to narrative fiction, it creates illusory

gether, beyond any difference, reality and possibility. In conclusion, mimesis, explored and developed through dramaturgic play, proves to be for pre-school children an irreplaceable training ground, where constituent inter-subjectivity can grow, identification and differentiation processes can be tested through co-creation of actions, representations and performances, and where needs and desires can be expressed and symbolically satisfied.

*Una delle più belle definizioni della mimica
è il sentire ciò che si vede come volto.
E anche quando tu interpreti il movimento
di una persona o di un animale o di un albero, è un volto.
È l'unica realtà che arriva all'anima.
E qualunque realtà che arrivi all'anima,
le arriva attraverso la trasformazione in volto.*

Orazio Costa Giovangigli⁵⁹

ry doubles of the world, when we assume an open attitude towards aesthetic experience, looking at a picture, going to the theatre, or the cinema, or reading a novel; we are forced to temporarily suspend our grip on the world, liberating energies up to now unavailable, and putting them at the service of a new regional ontology which can reveal to us new aspects of ourselves". Gallese, "Corpo non mente", 16.

⁵⁹ "One of the most beautiful definitions of mime is to perceive what can be seen as a face. And even when interpreting the movement of a person, or an animal, or a tree, it is a face. It is the only reality that reaches the soul. And any reality that can reach the soul, is able to do so only transforming itself into a face". Boggio, *Il corpo creativo*, 118.