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**Theatrical Exposure, Transformation and Spectatorial Agency
in Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree***

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Abstract

This paper examines how Tim Crouch's theatre in general, and his play *An Oak Tree* (2005) in particular, centres its focus on the role of spectators as active participants through stimulating their imagination by exposing theatrical procedures. It is claimed that Crouch follows Jacques Rancière's in viewing spectators as 'emancipated'. *An Oak Tree* takes conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin's homonymous work as its starting point; indeed, Crouch takes the notion of 'transformation' through imagination from conceptual art and brings it to theatre with *An Oak Tree*, a play that suggests that the only way to cope with loss is by using the transformative power of the mind.

Keywords: *An Oak Tree*, conceptual art, spectatorial agency, Tim Crouch, transformation

Resum

Aquest treball examina com el teatre de Tim Crouch en general i la seva obra, *An Oak Tree* (2005), en particular, es focalitza en el paper dels espectadors com a participants actius estimulants la seva imaginació mitjançant l'exposició del procediment teatral. S'afirma que Crouch segueix Jacques Rancière en la visió de l'espectador com a 'emancipat'. *An Oak Tree* pren la obra homònima de Michael Craig-Martin com a punt de partida; certament, Crouch pren la noció de la 'transformació' a través de la imaginació de l'art conceptual i la porta al teatre amb *An Oak Tree*, una obra que suggereix que l'única forma de gestionar la pèrdua és utilitzar el poder transformatiu de la ment.

Paraules clau: agenciament de l'espectador/a, *An Oak Tree*, art conceptual, Tim Crouch, transformació

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1. MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE

From my first encounter with the subject “Teatre Contemporani en Anglès” I fell in love with theatre, and after completing the course I was sure I wanted to do my end of degree paper on theatre. What is more, I was so fascinated by this world that I started to wonder why did I not have any previous ‘memorable’ contact with theatre? I started to pull my memory’s threads to trace my previous encounters with theatre. I managed to retrieve two memories, both from school trips. The first one was when we went to the theatre to see the musical *Grease* which, unsurprisingly, I loved since it was my first live musical, I knew all the songs and sang along the whole time, and being with friends undoubtedly added to the attractiveness of the experience. The second memory was from high school as well, when we visited another school to watch their school play. I do not recall the details of the play, but I do remember the urge it left in me to try to perform some theatre. Consequently, when we went back to school, I decided to sign up for our school’s Christmas theatre production. I remember rehearsing the play a couple of times before I dropped out because we learned that my grandmother was very ill, and we had to travel to Algeria to see her and say our last goodbye. So, there I left my brief journey through theatre until I made contact with it again last year.

Once my decision about the paper’s focus was clear, I wanted to narrow it to a specific playwright and to a specific play. I started navigating the net in search for inspiration, so I turned to the *Guardian* to read its reviews on contemporary British plays. I came across the article “The 50 Best Theatre Shows of the 21st Century”, where the ‘top 50’ contemporary plays were reviewed by several reviewers and theatre experts, such as Michael Billington, Lyn Gardner, and Catherine Love among others. I read the article and narrowed down the number to six plays. However, one play in particular had caught my attention, *An Oak Tree* by Tim Crouch, which led me to further investigation about it, its author and their origins. The more I read about Crouch, the more I felt captivated and drawn to his work. I read about his plays and his use of experimental form and his interest in the spectators and their agency, and the more I read, the easier my choice became. I finally selected *An Oak Tree* out of Crouch’s body of work, firstly because the artwork it draws its idea and name from, by David Craig-Martin, is fascinating and its transformative power exceeds imagination. Secondly, the fact that a different actor takes part in each performance of the play added to its appeal and made me want to know more about it and its creative process.

2. INTRODUCTION

*“The distinction between fact and fiction is a late acquisition of rational thought
– unknown to the unconscious, and largely ignored by the emotions”*

Arthur Koestler

“Never trust the teller, trust the tale”

D. H. Lawrence

Naturalistic theatre works very earnestly to make the audience members believe that what they are watching is a ‘copy’ or ‘mirror image’ of ‘reality’. In the case, for instance, of a realist Victorian Play, the stage will look as similar as possible to a Victorian setting – the costumes, furniture, accents, movements, and so on. Actors trained to perform in mainstream realist theatre are taught techniques and methods that will allow them to ‘become’ the character they are performing; as an illustration, Elaine Aston and George Savona explain on Stanislavskian acting, “the actor is to be regarded as an artist who may, by a process of instruction and self-interrogation, for the duration of a performance ‘become’ the character she/he plays” (1991, p. 47). They are encouraged to analyse every detail of the script, every punctuation mark, every verb and every gesture in order to psychologically deconstruct and reconstruct the character so they may ‘fuse’ with it or ‘inhabit’ it. The ultimate aim is to make the audience believe that what they are seeing is a slice of Victorian ‘reality’, with Victorian characters and a Victorian mindset. Such an approach relies on the passivity of the audience and strengthens the presence of the imaginary fourth wall, which remains undisturbed for the duration of the play.

Crouch’s plays are born of his disillusionment with the conventional realist modes of dramatic representation, and his unsatisfactory experience as an actor with the psychological approach to character and performance. In addition, he has a great faith in spectators and believes that they are capable of imagining whichever setting, whichever emotions, and distinguishing between fact and fiction by means of activating their imagination, “[T]he person who I want to own character”, Crouch has said, “should be the audience. That’s where I want ownership to exist” (2011, p. 25). The spectator’s intellectual and emotional agency are highly regarded by Crouch in his work. Moreover, he sees art as a form of hypnosis, which accesses the subconscious and overwrites the conscious (Crouch, personal communication, April 6, 2020). When they watch a performance, or rather, are present at a performance, he wants spectators to embark on the journey they chose or feel rather than having the journey explained and navigated for them by the performers on stage (Crouch 2011, p. 24). As Andy Smith,

Crouch's long-time collaborator alongside Karl James, also highlights, "[w]e want to let the audience in; let them be an audience; be with them. We don't want to 'poorly imagine' them, to make them feel ignored, stuck on the other side of an imaginary fourth wall" (2011, p. 412).

Crouch's theatre in general, and *An Oak Tree* (2005) in particular, uncovers the transformations deliberately hidden from the audience by realist theatre making and lays them bare on stage. As Catherine Love puts it, "[i]t hinges on the same transformation that occurs on stage, where any given body or object is always at least two different things at once, but whereas realist theatre attempts to conceal this doubling and transformation, *An Oak Tree* actively foregrounds it" (2017, p. 3). From the very beginning, Crouch establishes a connection with his audience by emphasising on the theatricality of the play, that is, the theatrical devices or mechanisms that will be on display throughout, such as objects standing for characters, script being read out, the playwright/main actor presenting himself as Tim Crouch and the second actor by his name and identifying the theatre where the performance is taking place. He does something similar in his first play *My Arm* (2003), where he not even once raises his arm above his head, in contrast with the (seemingly) autobiographical story recounted in the play. However, the spectators' power of imagination sees otherwise, and they are convinced that the story is Tim Crouch's and that his arm is above his head throughout the entire play. According to Crouch, this should be the central aim of theatre, to empower the audience and believe that they are able to imagine fiction, see it and relate it to facts. In this regard, Emilie Morin (2011) places Crouch within a broader strand of contemporary playwriting, including Martin Crimp and Sarah Kane, which "attempts to expose the processes and conventions which sustain the event of performance participate in a complex artistic history which engenders particular types of fusion between form and content" (p. 80).

3. TIM CROUCH:

Tim Crouch, born on 18 March 1964 in Bognor Regis, is a British theatre-maker, actor and director whose work is considered to be experimental and closely linked to conceptual art. Crouch studied Drama at Bristol University. After graduating, he founded the theatre company Public Arts, which devised and toured its own work for years. He took a postgraduate acting diploma at the Central School of Speech and Drama and became immersed in the world of acting for several years, a profession he found increasingly discouraging because he felt tied down by the traditional realist theatrical forms, including an insistence upon psychological analysis and approaches to character.

His first play, *My Arm*, was a response to the pressure he felt as an actor because of the insistence of naturalistic theatre upon realism and ‘real’ acting. The play is a monologue about a kid who decides to raise his arm above his head and refuses to bring it down. Crouch himself performs in this play, as he does in all his work, and he uses autobiographical language to describe the boy’s life. It is in a way an autobiographical piece without being an autobiographical piece – in other words, it is not about Crouch’s life – but it plays with the language of autobiography. To put it another way, it highlights “the duality that art permits where one thing could be another at the same time” (Henríquez, 2008, p. 38). For instance, Crouch is himself and another at the same time. He tells an autobiography which is not his and his at the same time because he is narrating it in the first person. *My Arm* also introduced his concerns about conceptual art, theatrical form, representation, authorship and the role of the audience that have endured in his work ever since. The radio adaptation of the play for the BBC won a Prix Italia for Best Adapted Drama in 2004.

His second play was *An Oak Tree*, the focus of my analysis. For now, I will just say that the play requires a second one apart from Crouch, who should be different in each performance. When it played off-Broadway in 2006/2007, the play received several awards, such as the Glasgow Herald Angel and an award for Best Actor in the Brighton festival. Crouch wrote his third play *England: A Play for Galleries*, for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007 on a Traverse Theatre commission. As its subtitle indicates, it is meant to be performed in art galleries. The play stages the story of a heart transplant, with its sick protagonist finding the replacement heart in an unnamed developing Middle Eastern country. Audience members are repeatedly instructed by Crouch and fellow actor Hannah Ringham to look, – “Look! Look!” – at the art exhibition around them and at the same time to look into the play with their imagination. The play is narrated in the first person, which alternates between Crouch and Ringham to highlight the fact that both performers are playing the same ‘character’, and therefore, that the spectators will not be able to attribute a gender to the ‘character’ on display alongside with the artwork exhibited in the gallery (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 448). This highlights Crouch’s concern about art, especially conceptual art, and its intertwined relationship with theatre. Crouch explored two forms of art and brought them together in performance at an art gallery, where in Act One spectators are asked to listen and not look to subtracts the visual aspect of theatre and find its most pure symbolic element, its inner vision which is unveiled through words rather than shown on stage. The second act, nonetheless, is different; spectators are positioned as if they were in a real theatre. There is a stage, two actors and the audience are the third. The dialogue is directed to the audience which they represent a widow who does not

speak English and the second actor acts as a translator between the two. Here there is a lot of theatricality in which the audience is involved (Henríquez, 2008, p. 36-37). The play touches upon many sensitive issues, such as the commodification of art – including, potentially, theatre – as well as social and political matters regarding Englishness and imperial history.

With his fourth play, *The Author* (2009), Crouch took a step further and placed the audience inside the play’s fictional space. That is, he “remove[d] almost all potential for stage spectacle of its own by removing the stage itself” (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 447). *The Author* was commissioned by London’s Royal Court Theatre for its Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, where plays such as Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) had premiered, and it has been read as a response to them “that satirises the graphically theatrical sex and violence for which these plays are notorious” (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 447).

In addition to plays for adult spectators, Crouch has written and performed a number of works for younger audiences, including *Shopping for Shoes* (2005), which won the Brian Way Award for Children's playwriting in 2007. He also revisited many of Shakespeare’s lesser-known characters in his series *I, Shakespeare* and brought them closer to younger audiences in his own transformative, comically witty way.



Figure 1. Tim Crouch in his one-man show, *I, Malvolio*. Credit: Marcus Yam, *The New York Times*

4. *AN OAK TREE*: a hypnotic play

4.1. *Introduction to the Play*

Tim Crouch’s second play *An Oak Tree* was inspired by and named after Michael Craig-Martin’s 1973 “An Oak Tree”, a conceptual work of art which consists of a glass of water placed on a glass shelf with a text next to it on the wall of the gallery (Figure 2). The text has a question and answer format (Q&A) explaining that what Craig-Martin did was to transform the glass of water into an oak tree. The answers highlight the impossibility of the artist’s claims:

“What I’ve done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water” (Craig-Martin, 1973). What is at stake here, and what inspired Crouch’s *An Oak Tree*, is how Craig-Martin’s piece invites viewers to reflect on the transformative power of (conceptual) art. The ability to believe that an object is something different from what its physical form indicates. This transformative vision is central to conceptual art, where the concept behind the work is more important than the final object itself.

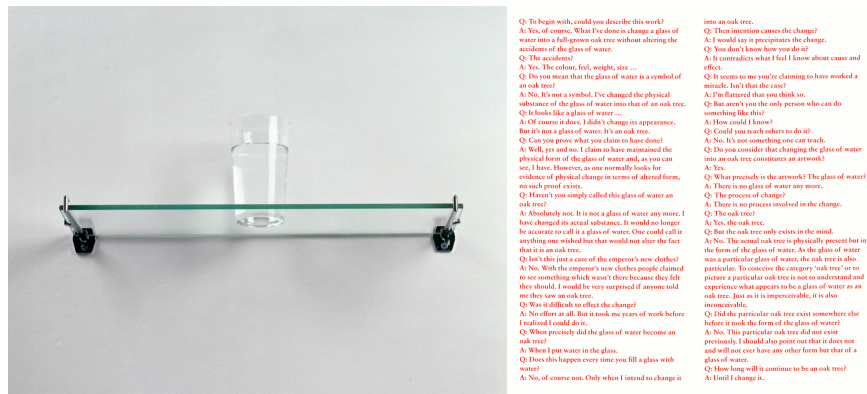


Figure 2. Michael Craig-Martin work, *An Oak Tree* (1973), featuring a glass of water on a shelf with a Q&A-style accompanying text.

Crouch’s play takes after Craig-Martin’s transformative power and constructs a play that could be considered a conceptual artwork. Crouch himself pointed at theatre being “the ultimate conceptual art form (2005, n.p.). There are two performers in the play, Crouch who plays the Hypnotist and himself and a second performer who could be male or female; crucially, this performer has never ever read or seen the play before. The twist comes in when we learn that this second performer is different for each performance. The second actor reads from a script given to them by Crouch or repeats what Crouch tells them through a headphone or as he instructs them directly. Every performance is somehow a live rehearsal where Crouch and the second performer read from scripts and talk through headphones. In my view, this playfulness with theatrical form and the transformative power of the play are what make the play a work of genius.

The play is about a father destroyed by grief, by the loss of his daughter; his wife is about to leave him. The father moves around the world without knowing where he comes from or where he is going. He is lost in his grief, or ‘guided’ by his grief, just as the second actor does not know where to go with the play and is guided by Crouch. The daughter was killed in a car accident when she was on her way to her piano lesson; the other driver was a stage hypnotist. Months later, the father attends the hypnotist’s show in search of help. Since the accident, the hypnotist has lost his “mojo” (p. 94), because he has been tormented by guilt. When the Father

and the Hypnotist meet, they embark on a deeply emotional, and hypnotic journey where the Hypnotist guides the Father by activating his imagination through language, which is the same thing Crouch is doing with the second actor, and at the same time is what the play is doing with the spectators – i.e. evoking situations through language which the spectators will construct through their imagination.

The play lays bare the theatrical mechanisms naturalistic theatre works so hard to hide and at the same time manages to maintain the emotional thrust of its story. The play, therefore, has a metatheatrical awareness of its nature as theatre and of the circumstances of its performance. As Stephen Bottoms indicates,

Yet far from veiling the material mechanisms of theatricality, Crouch makes his audience conscious of their own process of spectatorial meaning-seeking, by showing them – dramatizing? – the theatrical processes whereby the second actor (effectively the spectator’s surrogate) is interpolated into the play. (2009, p. 68)

The play reminds spectators about its theatricality and its fictionality, the fact that what happens on stage is covenant between the play and a group of spectators who agreed to see it knowing beforehand that it is fiction. The real transformation happens within the spectators’ imagination, and what happens on stage is just the vehicle that allows such transformation. The play is possible because the spectators believe in it and are able to activate their imagination through the mechanisms of theatre (Appendix). They are put at the centre of attention of the play and invited to fill the gaps and construct meaning from and for the play.

4.2. Stage image

“Eight chairs stacked at the sides of the stage. One piano stool in the middle of the stage”, “one wireless microphone” and “an onstage sound system and speakers” (p. 56). Crouch keeps his stage very minimalistic, “almost a bare stage” (Bottoms, 2009, p. 66). The stage does not have to match a hypnotist’s stage, nor does it have to look like anything. It ought to be simple and clean for the audience to fill it in their imagination with the necessary furniture, props and whatever they feel proper. That is, Crouch wants to highlight that “the subject of theatre [is] what happens in the audience and the object of theatre [is] what happens on the stage”, as he mentioned in his interview with Caridad Svich (2005, n.p.). The more open the play is, the more willingly they will be attracted to it. Crouch also notes on his “stripped-down staging approach” (Bottoms, 2009, p. 69) that “I minimize what’s happening on stage so I can

maximize what's happening in the audience that. If I maximize what was happening on stage, I feel there's an inverse dynamic which reduces the role of the audience" (Crouch quoted in Bottoms, 2009, p. 69).



Figure 3. The stage of *Un Roble*, a production of Bella Batalla.
José Juan Rodríguez next to Luis Sorolla, main actor and translator of *An Oak Tree*. Credit: Luz Soria

4.3. Dramatic Shape:

One essential characteristic of drama is the way in which it divides its plot into sections. As Aston and Savona state, “drama is divided up into acts and/or scenes which signal the beginning and end of units of action in relation to the whole” (1991, p.16). In a naturalistic play, action follows “the traditional graphic pattern of the rise and fall towards an inevitable conclusion” (Aston & Savona, 1991, p. 18). That is, they follow a teleological order of events (Figure 4), where the action rises until it falls into the denouement, usually hand in hand with a linear treatment of time. However, non-naturalistic plays, such as *An Oak Tree*, disrupt the teleological construction of plot and story and the corresponding division into acts and scenes, as well as the concomitant treatment of time – as we will see further in this analysis. This kind of play intends to defamiliarize and make strange the means of dramatic and theatrical representation in order to make us question our usual awareness and views of reality; it invites us to craft a new perception of reality by looking at it again and seeing it with fresh eyes, through imagination and emotions as Crouch’s play seeks. In other words, they defamiliarize our experience of reality.

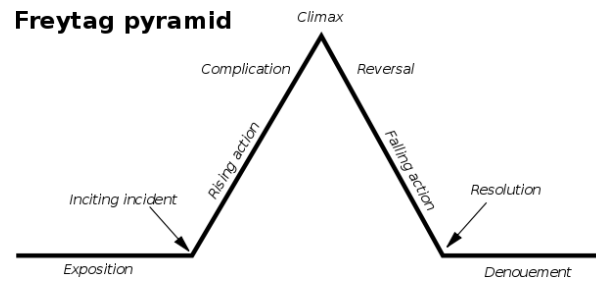


Figure 4. Freytag's pyramid describes the teleological dramatic shape of naturalistic plays

Crouch's play disrupts the naturalistic dramatic shape by dividing the plot into a brief prologue, followed by eight scenes and no acts – except at the end of scene two, where the “End of Act One!” is announced (p. 78) without the beginning having been signalled in any way or Act Two being ever mentioned – which unsettles the traditional three-act and five-act structures. Furthermore, Crouch highlights the structural devices that shape plays and lays them bare to the eyes of the audience. As Aston and Savona underline, “[p]lays which deviate from this traditional shaping of dramatic plot serve to highlight the rules and conventions governing theatrical construction” (1991, p. 31). Crouch uncovers those rules and conventions in order to prove the spectator's autonomy and capacity – in spite of being aware of the fictionality of the play and its mechanisms all the time – to engage, decode and interpret the play by filling in the gaps generated by its non-naturalistic plot structure.

The published text is preceded by a series of “Notes for the second actor” where Crouch explains to them the mechanisms of the play. He presents the play as a “two hander” (p. 55). The second actor, who has never read nor seen the play before, is instructed to walk together with Crouch on stage at the start. The notes underline that the actor is different in each performance – “No one ever does it twice” (p. 55) – which Crouch uses as a device to stress the fictionality of the play. Furthermore, the notes explain to the second actor that they will not be asked to improvise; every word is scripted, and it is going to be fed to them directly through simple instructions, through an earpiece, or by them reading directly from pieces of script. The only thing Crouch asks from the actor is for them to be open and let the play flow through – “you can do nothing wrong” (p. 55). Crouch suggests to the second actor and himself to meet an hour before the performance to familiarise themselves with the stage and the instruments and practice a short extract from the script “to get a sense of sightreading in the space” (p. 55). The only matter Crouch warns them about is that the nature of the story might be too close to them, if that is the case, he would advise against them participating in the play.

The next section in the published text is “Notes,” which Crouch opens by describing the stage image and the distribution of the objects on stage. This is discussed in section 4.2. above. The “notes” then go on to refer to the ‘characters’ in the play, namely a Hypnotist and a Father. The Hypnotist, played by Crouch, is dressed in a silver waistcoat and a cape, whilst the Father is dressed in whatever clothes the second actor chooses to wear that day, that is, their usual clothes. In other words, Crouch trusts the spectator’s imagination to fill the gap left by the non-specific description by drawing the Father’s image in their imagination regardless of what the second actor’s looks like. In this section on the ‘characters’, Crouch insists on the cluelessness of the second actor –any adult male or female– about the play and the script. He also makes a second reference to the instrument they will be using for the play. In addition, Crouch specifies that the Bach music that is going to be played during the performance is the Aria from the *Goldberg Variations*. Crouch’s choice of Bach’s multi-layered structural divisions and combinations in the *Goldberg Variations* goes in hand with his multi-layered play – the layering of ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ and of ‘characters’/actors/audience – and adds to the show’s entrancing, indeed hypnotic qualities. What is more, the piece ends as it begins, with the return of the Aria: “It is a flawed rendition: faltering but ambitious, failing to resolve until the very end of the play when it moves into the First Variation” (p.56). Correspondingly, Crouch uses music as another abstract and conceptual art form which functions on a complete level of suggestion, as he declares in his conversation with Svich,

the play suggests that she dies somewhere around the end of the beginning Aria -- and this is the section which is worked and re-worked throughout the play [...] It is unable to resolve -- just as the Father is unable to move beyond his loss. (2005, n.p.)

The following section in the play is the “Prologue”, where Crouch introduces himself to the audience, states the name of the theatre the performance is taking place in, and introduces the second performer, highlighting their ignorance of the play and making a parallelism between them and the audience – Crouch “*invites the second actor out of their seat in the audience and onto the stage*” and presents him by name stating his participation in the play as an actor performing a role and remarking that “the story is as new to X as it is to you” (p. 57). The prologue thus signals the play’s self-referentiality and metatheatricality; that is, it draws attention of its fictionality by addressing the audience directly and openly acknowledging that the people performing it are actors. As Bottoms states, in this way “Crouch makes his audience conscious of their own process of spectatorial meaning-seeking, by showing them [...] the

theatrical process whereby the second actor (effectively the spectator's surrogate) is interpolated into the play" (2009, p. 68).

The play's division into scenes starts right after the prologue. It is made up of eight Scenes, which they unfold as follows:

▪ **Scene 1:**

In the first part of the scene, Crouch and the second performer read from a piece of script that sounds like a conversation between the actors performing the play themselves. In the second part of the scene, Crouch delivers words to the actor and asks him to repeat after him – e.g., "Ask me what I'm being. Say, 'what are you being?'" (p. 59). Therefore, the scene is a scripted conversation between Crouch and the actor introducing the story and 'characters' to the audience and to the actor at the same time. Crouch invites them and, for that matter, the audience itself to "look" (p. 59), yet not with their physical eyes –the retina– but with their mind's eye. This will allow them to see on stage a Hypnotist and a Father who lost his beloved daughter at the hands of this very hypnotist. Furthermore, Crouch and the actor face the audience and ask who they are – "who are they?" (p. 60). Thus, the theatre audience is cast as an audience in a pub near the Oxford road a year from now. As Bottoms (2009) argues, "[t]he spectators are cast as 'characters' in the play but simultaneously reminded of their non-coincidence with the spectators they represent" (p. 66). In fact, nothing is a coincidence in this play; every action, every structure, every word and every character are planned for and deliberately put together to complement and to mirror each other. The theatre's spectators mirror the spectators in the pub a year from now, and the second actor mirrors the father lost in his life's script.

▪ **Scene 2:**

The scene starts with the music "O Fortuna" playing, and Crouch arranging eight chairs on the stage. The hypnotist, after the music stops, runs on stage and starts insecurely and inefficiently presenting his show to his a-year-from-now spectators. Ironically enough and to add to Crouch's mock-comic style, the hypnotist promises his spectators to "see no false nothing false tonight. Nothing phoney. No plants, no actors" (p. 63). Perhaps hints at Crouch's adoption of the idea from Conceptual art that whatever the actor does or reacts to the play, they are never going to be false or unreal. Equivalently, whatever the spectators see or imagine, it is never going to be false or unreal. Similarly, here Crouch is authorising his spectators' individual engagement and focus on the play they write in their mind's eye, not on the one he wrote – "You will be stars of the stars of this evening's -" (p. 63). In other words, Crouch promises his spectators that they will be the centre of the play and the stage, "I'm stepping back to let you

come forward” (p. 64). As the show progresses, the Father volunteers and sits on the piano stool. We are transported alongside the Father/actor to the scene of the event where Claire, the Father’s daughter, was killed – maybe in a flashback, a memory or it could even be a hypnotic trance, we do not know (Appendix). At this point, the Hypnotist verbalises the words the Father is supposed to say – “don’t repeat anything now. Just listen to what you say” (p. 65) – and the sound of the lorry from time to time reminds us of where we are – a suggestion to deepen the trance. The Hypnotist manages to hypnotise the Father into thinking that he was the one behind the wheel and he was the one who killed the girl, repeating several times, “I wish I were dead” (p. 77). The trance is then interrupted and the identity of the Father and/or the second actor – blending fiction and reality, as he says, “I’m Andrew Smith” / “I’m Claire’s dad” (p. 78) – is revealed.

At the end of the second scene, Crouch marks the “End of Act One” (p. 78), although its beginning is not manifest, and nor is any other act signalled subsequently. This might be part of Crouch’s conscious design of the play, whereby signalling the end of act one marks a turning point in the play where its dynamic starts to shift. Luis Sorolla – the actor who translated and acted in the Spanish production of *An Oak Tree* (*Un Roble*, Pavón Teatro Kamikaze, 2018) – mentioned that verbalising the end of act one helps the second actor to understand that here comes a different part, and at the same time, it helps the spectators to orient themselves in the play. Maybe it is a play in two acts and there is no need to say more to make this clear (Appendix). Sorolla also emphasized that what is clear is that the play and its form start to crumble after the second scene. Moreover, this first act happens without any alteration in the temporal frame – except when the Father is on the roadside – functions like a time and space unit. We are confused about who is talking, whether the Father, the second actor, Crouch or the Hypnotist, between what is script and what is not. This fragmented experience mirrors the experience the Father/actor is going through, and the play indicates its structure at this point so as to deepen into the feeling of loss (Appendix).

▪ Scene 3:

This scene presents a temporal break from scene 2; it is a flashback maybe between scenes 2 and 4 – Crouch/Hypnotist was on his knees at the end of scene 2 and goes back on his knees at the start of scene 4. Both the Hypnotist and the Father read from pieces of scripts. They read about the night Claire died – “That evening. Dusk” (p. 80). The Hypnotist tells his side of the story, and the Father tells his when they learned about Claire’s death. Crouch resorts to synaesthesia to describe the pain and the loss felt that night – “That night has a colour, a touch and a sound” (p. 80). Words on their own are not enough to describe the feelings and emotions

engendered by that loss (see section 4.5.). By means of this device, Crouch incites spectators to experience and view that night with their senses; therefore, the spectators' imagination is activated, and their minds' eyes prompted to be alert.

▪ **Scene 4:**

Crouch/Hypnotist goes back on his knees, the position he ended up in in scene 2 after the second actor reveals himself as Claire's father and, simultaneously, reveals his/her real name too for the first time – "I'm Andrew Smith", "I'm Claire's dad" (p. 78). The Father is still under hypnosis and believing in the Hypnotist's suggestion that he shat himself and that he killed a little girl. From the beginning of the scene, the Hypnotist is trying to explain to the Father that it was all hypnosis, but the Father is not to be talked out of the hypnosis. Yet, the Father tormented by the loss of his daughter and the unhappiness of his wife, asks the Hypnotist for help. To deepen the trance, Crouch uses a series of inductions and dispersed trances where he goes back to the hypnosis, dressing the Father/second actor up, then going back to the story – "Claire's fine", "I mean I found her –," "I haven't found her" (p. 87), this hesitation signals the difference between the physical and metaphysical presence of Claire; he has found her but not physically. He has found a metaphysical representation of Claire. The scene ends with instructions for the following scene, meanwhile Bach plays and then stops.

▪ **Scene 5:**

A break from scene 4, maybe another flashback to that fateful evening. Crouch feeds a speech to the second performer through his ear pin; the speech is meant to be delivered directly to the audience. It opens with "Ladies and gentlemen" (p. 89), thus reminding the audience of their role and their presence in the play/show. "Nod your head if you understand" (p. 89) keeps them aware and alert to the need to engage their imagination in the process of transformation described by them. These words are delivered by the Father, but they are fed to him by the Hypnotist. Paradoxically, there is a doubling yet fusion between two subjects who are both suffering from traumas: one from the pain of guilt and the other from the grief of loss. Claire's presence "was between lines, inside circles, hiding beneath angels [...] She was the spaces beneath the chairs" (p. 89); Claire, in other words, has overcome the materiality of the world. Crouch uses Craig-Martin's conceptual ideas of transformation and the power of the mind transform the roadside tree into Claire, she filled in spaces and gaps, she was the tree, the tree was her – "I scooped up the properties of Claire and changed the physical substance of the tree into that of my daughter. / Three. Two. One" (p. 90). Bach music plays while Crouch/the Hypnotist feeds some more instructions to the second performer about the following scene. Bach stops.

▪ **Scene 6:**

We go back to the dialogue between Crouch/Hypnotist and the Actor/Father. Following the former's instructions at the end of scene 5, the second actor asks for a drink of water, and they are left alone on stage for thirty seconds during which we can hear the sound of the roadside in the background, just to keep our imagination linked to the story and to that evening – again, a deepening technique. After he comes back, the Actor/Father reads from a piece of script while Crouch/Hypnotist is sitting on a chair. From here onwards, the distinction between what is 'real' and what is 'fictional' becomes even more blurred. It is unclear who is speaking, whether it is Crouch the actor or the Hypnotist, the second Actor or the Father. Are they playing themselves or are they still the Hypnotist and the Father? This layered playfulness and theatricality add to the play's transformative charm and invite remind the audience to stay active and focused:

FATHER: I get that she's dead. Or is that all in his mind?
HYPNOTIST: Whose?
FATHER: Mine. The father's.
HYPNOTIST: No, she really is dead.
FATHER: And you killed her? (p. 92)

In this scene, Crouch hints that characters' backgrounds have little importance, contrarily to what naturalistic theatre, where details are emphasised to make characters more 'real' and believable, "How old is she meant to be?", the Father/Actor asks about the Marcia's, his other daughter's, age, to which Crouch/Hypnotist answers, "I don't know. Whatever you think" (p. 93), thus leaving the choice to the spectators, who have the power to decide about the specifics of 'characters' lives. The line between the fictional audience in the pub and the audience in the theatre also blurs. The Father/Actor is asked to go sit back with the audience in the pub, but the pub audience is gone – unlike the one in the theatre. What is more, time also becomes fuzzy as the story is set in the future – a year in the future – while the accident happened three months ago, yet it is "also going to happen in nine months time. Nine months from now, here, in the theatre" (p. 95). In other words, the *sujet* presents flashbacks and flashforwards followed by several returns to the present – which blur the line between the theatre's and the *fabula*'s present (Richardson, 2006, p. 58) (for more detail, see the section "Treatment of Time" below). The Father/Actor is left with a dilemma: "Is there nothing we can do to stop it happening?" (p. 95).

▪ **Scene 7:**

Crouch plays a different character here, the Father's wife, Dawn. He sits on a chair with his back facing the second actor and the audience. The second actor reads from a piece of script. The Father is absent from Dawn's reality and her feeling of abandonment is heightened. Their voices overlap as they speak at the same time. The Father is trying to make her relax by means of what looks like a hypnosis session – all the hypnosis moments in text are printed in bold type in the published playscript. Meanwhile, Dawn is trying to make him understand that their daughter is dead – “our beautiful daughter is lying in a fridge somewhere and you're asking me to relax my fucking knees” (p. 97). This part of the scene reminds me of Craig-Martin's artwork and the conversation conceptual art triggers about whether the idea it represents is possible within the materiality of the world. That is, how can a tree be transformed into a person, or how can a glass of water be transformed into an oak a tree? At this point in Crouch's play, the Hypnotist/the Father – since the former is feeding the latter with what to say while “*holding a chair on his hip, as he would a five-year-old girl*” (p. 100) – transform the piano stool, which was previously a tree, into Claire – “It's not a tree anymore [...] I've changed it into Claire (p. 101) – in an attempt to help both Marcia and Dawn cope with the grief of loss. This transformation seems impossible to Dawn, who holds onto the material aspect of life, “She never existed for you in the first place, did she? She was just some idea” (p. 98). She does not want to open her mind and accept the potentially healing power of art, “That is a tree, I am your wife, this is your daughter, that is a road. This is what matters. This. This is what we have to deal with. This” (p. 101-102), “See things for what they are” (p. 101). Accordingly, the play raises questions about “facts” and “truths”, what is the truth of things? What is their essence? Is what we see all there is? “See things for what they are” (p. 101). These are questions conceptual art lays bare, and which Craig-Martin asks and answers in his work *An Oak Tree*.

Bach's music starts to play, and Crouch then is back to being Crouch, the actor, addressing the second actor as the second actor giving them directions – “I want you to give me that next line on your script” (p. 99). When the Bach music stops, the lines between who is speaking start to blur – i.e. the Father tells Crouch/the Hypnotist/Dawn that s/he has woken Marcy, and right after they ask Crouch/Hypnotist: “Do I stay here? Do I stay sitting?” (p. 99). Crouch then goes back to his ‘character’, the Hypnotist – as he starts with a suggestion, “you're cold in this rain / Three. Two. One” (p. 100), which may indicate that the previous episode with Dawn is a hypnotic trance or a flashback to the Father's past – but then the boundaries between Crouch/Hypnotist and Actor/Father blur again and we are left wondering whose voice we are hearing. In spite of the fact that they are reading from a script and laying bare all

theatre's hidden devices, the audience engage with the play and its emotions and fill the gaps those devices and the story leave. The multi-layered play never ceases to parade its richness, its emotions and its shapeshifting from scene to scene. At the end of the scene, the roles are reversed; the Father is the one who is giving the Hypnotist instructions and suggestions, "Say. Say, 'I'm sorry'" (p. 103). As Crouch stated about this moment, "it is like playing with the idea of control, switching to kindness, freeing the Father from the control a bit" (personal communication, April 6, 2020).



Figure 5. Tim Crouch with Amy Griffiths as second actor. Credit: Greg Goodale.

▪ Scene 8:

The scene opens with "O Fortuna" playing loud, which sets the mood for a cataclysmic moment charged with huge emotional power. Additionally, as Sorolla explains, the song sets the mood for the Hypnotist's show; it is a kind of prototypical music in a hypnosis show. Hence, before the last scene begins, "O Fortuna" indicates spectators should be ready for a hypnosis sequence (Appendix). Both performers are reading from the script for the second time in the play, directly to the audience. Apparently, both of them are trying to hypnotise the audience and take them to the night Claire died. It is Claire's and the Hypnotist's perspectives and memories of that night. On the one hand, Crouch/the Hypnotist is asking the audience to imagine themselves behind the wheel – to be in his place, "you're 51" (p. 104) – "driving forward in space and time" (p. 104), when suddenly "a girl is there. Her eyes are wide open" while "she looks at you" and "everything slows" (p. 105). On the other hand, the Father suggests to the audience to be Claire that night – "you're 12" (p. 104) – what the night felt like, and what Claire felt like, "The air is cold. You're listening to music. You're not too tired" (p. 105), until the car comes her way and "the music stops" and "everything stops" (p. 105). The audience are asked to dislocate from their subject positions and take the Hypnotist's and Claire's by means of hypnotic language, "When I say so, you're driving" – said by the Hypnotist, "When I say so, you're walking" – said by the Father (p. 104); "When I say sleep, you say goodbye", the Hypnotist says, "When I say sleep, you're free", the Father says, "Sleep" – said by both (p.

105). Or maybe this is an opportunity for the Father to say goodbye, “When you open your eyes” (p. 106). Blackout. The End.

As Sorolla mentioned in our conversation about the play, the structure of *An Oak Tree* is organized like a hypnotic process, as the hypnotist they consulted for the play explained to them (Appendix). The preparation, a preliminary talk between the hypnotist and the person(s) to be hypnotized, is like what happens in scenes 1 and 2, where the Hypnotist tests the volunteer’s susceptibility and perceptiveness to the suggestions. The first stage of hypnosis is the induction, where the person enters into a trance – as flashbacks from the past come and go and the trance gradually deepens (Royle, 2005, p. 141), as happens in scenes 2, 4, 7, and 8. Crouch uses direct suggestions, such as counting –which we see in several scenes– and the command to sleep as inductions, as Jonathan Royle explains about his hypnotism techniques: “Then you’d count from 3 to 2, usually using the standard kind of phrases along the way and on 1 when you say sleep, all the actions are carried out quickly” (2005, p. 155). Likewise, as deepening techniques, Crouch uses the sounds – the sound of the roadside and the sound of the lorry, for instance – as well as visual imagery – especially when he uses colours synaesthetically to describe and relate to emotions. Additionally, Crouch uses “Fractionation” (Kuhns, 2010, p. 44) to make the trance deeper. That is, he creates a series of mini trances where each trance takes the Father deeper than the last.

▪ Treatment of time

Unlike naturalistic plays where the treatment of time is linear, *An Oak Tree* has a very peculiar treatment of time, where time goes forward and backward moving from present to future and to the past by means of flashbacks. As part of this fluid time frame, the audience are present at the theatre where the play opens, but are also transported, or are taken to transport themselves, to a pub near the Oxford road a year on from the performance, “It is this time next year” (p. 60). We start in the theatre at the present time, and then we are moved forward to the Hypnotist’s show taking place a year in the future, while we are also presented with flashbacks –through hypnosis maybe– to the past, and back to the future again. By arranging all this chronologically on a piece of paper, you will extract the story or *fabula* from the non-linear plot or *sujet* (Richardson, 2006, p. 58). Crouch thus allows us to travel through time by creating gaps in the plot timeline; however, the emotional power of the play increases. The audience fills in the gaps left by the misfit between story and plot with emotions, like a magic trick where the secrets of the trick are revealed, but instead of killing the magic, Crouch’s play enhances our emotions and our investment in the play. As Brian Richardson explains, it is not important where a narrative starts – whether *in medias res*, at a culminating moment and then moves

backward in time, as long as it is “a self-consistent, unitary story will always be able to be inferred from the events presented, regardless of the sequence of their presentation” (2006, p. 59). The complexity of time in the play makes the second performer/Father, and even us the audience, wonder if maybe we could change the course of events because “it hasn’t happened yet” (p. 94). “It’s a year from now, if we’re a year in the future and the accident was three months ago [...] the accident’s also going to happen in nine months’ time [...] is there anything we can do to stop it happening?” (p. 95). It is a comprehensible way of facing grief and coping with loss, however, it is not possible and renders the spectators and the Father as helpless, as Love observes,

This dual temporal positioning – we are both in the theatre, now, before the terrible events of the play, as well as in that fictional pub in a year’s time – has the further effect of making spectators feel at once in the know and helpless. (2017, p. 49)

4.4. Actors/ ‘Characters’

An Oak Tree, as we saw before, is a two hander where Crouch plays the ‘character’ of a stage hypnotist, and the second performer plays the ‘character’ of a desolate father. As instructed by Crouch, the Hypnotist is dressed “in a silver waistcoat, cap, etc” (p. 56), and the second performer in whatever clothes they usually wear in their daily lives. Crouch, however –as he instructed Sorolla to do when he attended the production of *Un Roble* in Madrid (2019) – emphasises that the description he gives about the father should not match the description of the second actor. If the description he had in mind is similar to the actor’s physical description, it ought to be changed to a completely different one (Appendix). Moreover, the performer could be male or female of any adult age and ethnicity; it is about an abstract transformation rather than a physical one, which allows the audience to see something else, to imagine. Hence, by means of this description – “you’re 46 years old, you’re six foot two. Your lips are cracked. Your fingernails are dirty. You’re wearing a crumpled Gore-tex. Jacket. Your trousers are muddy, say, your shoes are muddy. You have tremors. You’re unshaven” (p. 59) – he is leading the audience to see the actor dressed and looking in a certain way. In this way, the audience’s imagination is activated and through autosuggestion, they will be able to see the ‘character’ of the Father as described through words rather than through what they physically see. The second performer(s) have neither seen nor read the play before. They play a ‘character’ who is lost because of grief, who does not know where to go in life, a situation that is analogous to the one

they find themselves in, since they do not know where the play is going from one moment to another – the Father ‘character’ and the second performer mirror each other. As Crouch asserts,

the actor, who doesn’t know the play, plays a character who doesn’t know their world, from grief, really, and that character is played by someone who doesn’t know their world, by not knowing the play they’re in, so there is a nice constant sort of movement back and forward between those two things. (2011, p. 18)

Furthermore, if the story is close to an actor in anyway, they are advised against participating in the play as second performer. The play is aware of its nature as a play and the ‘characters’ of their status as characters; they are presented as actors performing fictitious characters in a stage hypnotist’s show. In this regard, the play is highly self-referential. Nonetheless, as the play progresses, the lines dividing actor from ‘character’ cut start to blur and we are increasingly unable to differentiate between who is talking, the actors, who are scripted as well, or the ‘characters’. They sometimes merge into one and we are left to wonder who is who. As Love emphasises, “it becomes less and less clear where ‘character’ ends and ‘performer’ begins – while both, of course, remain roles created and scripted by the text” (2017, p. 43). Therefore, Crouch consciously creates uncertainties and ambiguities regarding the participants in the play. Perhaps, this uncertainty mirrors and represents the “confused and tortured mind of a grieving parent” (Love, 2017, p. 42).

An Oak Tree is not about actors and how well they can perform, it is about the spectators and their central role in theatre – it works “by the performer trying not to think, or the performer trying not to feel, as well, but in such a context whereby thought and feeling is engendered predominantly in the audience rather than on stage”, as Crouch confirms in his conversation with Rebellato (2011, p. 14). Performers are a conduit and a means through which the audience is impelled to feel, imagine and interpret, rather than performers and playwrights encoding and decoding ‘ideas’ for them. As Aston and Savona state, “[t]he spectator is now positioned, by the conjunction of ‘radical’ text and anti-illusionistic performance aesthetic, at a critical remove from the dramatic fiction” (1991, p. 43). As Crouch observes in this regard, “there is a big ask in this for an audience –to not rely upon the agency of the playwright or the actor or the production or the form to *make things easy*” (2011a, p. 425; italics original).

The play creates gaps between what things are and what the performance says they are. For instance, as we saw before, Crouch is the Hypnotist, the second performer is the grieving Father, and both, at the same time, perform their ‘role’ as actors within the play; in addition,

Crouch at one point plays Dawn, the Father's wife. In like manner, a chair is the Father's second child, a piano stool is a tree that subsequently becomes Claire, the lost daughter. Everything fills in for something else. Objects standing for 'characters' is usual in Crouch's work – as it is the case in his first play *My Arm*, where random objects selected from the audience stand in for 'characters' in the play – “yet theatrical transformations unfold nonetheless, compelling us to invest our emotions in this patently fictional narrative” (Love, 2017, p. 36).

According to Morin, pointing at Crouch's work alongside Martin Crimp's and Sarah Kane's, what matters is “to acknowledge that their reluctance to succumb to a representational impulse has opened up novel territories for thinking about playwriting” (2011, p. 83). As Love shows once more, “[a]udiences, in this model, are able to see all at once the piano stool, the oak tree and Claire, with each of those individual layers of representation impacting upon one another” (2017, p. 39). The second performer at one point asks, “How free am I” (p.58), to which Crouch responds, “Every word we speak is scripted but otherwise—” (p. 59). This applies to spectators too: their response to the play and the script is up to them; Crouch does not control their reaction, nor any kind of response they might give; only the text is scripted. “Otherwise” is linked to the uncertainty of a live performance where anything could happen. Consequently, the audience may ask themselves to what extent what they are looking at is the 'character' in the play or the performer's reaction to the script, which makes the play unique every performance as these reactions are never recurrent.

These ambiguities and fuzzy boundaries support the play's openness and availability for different interpretations as audiences watching it and readers inspecting its pages. This raises the question Love posits in her analysis of *An Oak Tree*, “Can art be truly transformative (and transforming), or does it just furnish us with comforting illusions?” (2017, p. 43). Love states that this question is not fully or univocally answered by the play, and I agree with her. I think the play's aim is not to give answers to this question, or others, but to open spectators' minds and lead them to creatively decode it for themselves. Further in her analysis of the play, Love supports this idea: “ the procedural author *actively* inserts gaps within a carefully bounded structure, creating spaces to be imaginatively filled [...] the procedural author is seeking out – indeed, relying upon – the engagement and interpretation of the audience” (2017, p. 47).

4.5. Dialogue

As we saw in previous sections, the whole play is scripted and the second actor reads from the script directly or is fed instructions by Crouch, either through the ear pin or directly, in which

case the instructions are audible to the audience. They are never to improvise anything; as Crouch notes in his “Notes for the second actor”, “you would never be asked to generate words of your own” (p. 55), albeit, “The audience witnesses a performer responding spontaneously in the moment, while Crouch “performs” his role” (Svich, 2005, n.p.). Crouch uses hypnotic language, as discussed in preceding examination, as his play takes place in a hypnotist’s show. In addition, Crouch’s use of colours makes the audience experience or view the night of the accident with their senses in an unusual way: “The Father’s subjective experience of the night of Claire’s death, for example, is evoked through a monologue (again read from a clipboard) suggesting a weirdly disjunctive synaesthesia” (Bottoms, 2009, p. 69). That night’s pain was so great that words alone cannot describe it, “That night has a colour, a touch and a sound” (p. 80). At the same time, the use of synaesthesia helps to attain a multisensory experience which heightens the story’s emotionalism through a kind of sensory suggestiveness. It makes the night more vivid and almost tangible (Otterspeer, 2010, p. 149).

As Aston and Savona note, “[i]n its most common form, dialogue is structured as a turn-taking system” (1991, p. 54). This form is subverted by Crouch as he instructs the Father/second actor to not “repeat anything now. Just listen to what you say” (p. 65) and through his constant repetition of “you say” without the second performer uttering a word while the dialogue is delivered by Crouch/Hypnotist in his name. The dialogue meant for the “you” to answer is uttered by the “I”, hence unsettling the deictic basis of dialogue. Even the “here” and “now” blur because we are not sure if “now” refers to the futuristic a year-from-now, the Hypnotist’s show, or the past which the Father’s flashbacks and trances take us to. Neither can we be sure whether “here” refers to the Hypnotist’s stage or the theatre’s – which might seem the same but taking into account the transformation processes the play foregrounds, they are different. Is “here” the theatre, the Hypnotist’s show stage, the roadside, the Hypnotist’s mind or the Father’s mind? Every detail adds to the layered structure of the play and highlights its ambiguity. When the Father points at the piano stool and says it is an oak tree which he has transformed into Claire, it presents a challenge to the eyes because the deictic “this” does not correspond to what the Father says it is. Nonetheless, not only imagination allows for such correspondence to happen in the Father’s mind and the spectators’, but it is also a mechanism for coping with grief.

Crouch devises a script where dialogue is visibly planned. This is unlike naturalistic theatre, where the dialogue between characters is meant to seem spontaneous and unplanned, even if it has been thoroughly planned by the playwright and analysed and rehearsed by the actors. By exposing this theatrical device, Crouch does not undermine the effectiveness of

dialogue; on the contrary, he enhances it by making the audience work on its gaps and slippage towards deciphering its meaning and intention. By doing so, alongside other devices, Crouch is stretching the limits of what can be done in theatre and with theatre: “Crouch demonstrated that the theatre space – together with the performance of written dialogue spoken within it – had transformational possibilities potentially exceeding those of the gallery” (Bottoms, 2009, p. 65).

4.6. Stage Directions/Instructions

Crouch starts his play with notes for the second actor and some other general notes about the play, as analysed in the section “Dramatic Shape”. Crouch gives extra-dialogic directions rendered in italics in the published text – e.g., “*The HYPNOTIST feeds instructions to the FATHER’s headphones*” (p. 64) – which “denote the directions which are set apart from the dialogue on the page” (Aston & Savona, 1991, p. 76), and instructions – from Crouch/Hypnotist – to the second actor, fed to them through their headphones or directly. For instance, Crouch/Hypnotist feeds instructions to the Father’s/second actor’s headphones, “*I’d like you to count for five in your head and in your own way, your own time, come up stage and sit on the piano stool facing the audience*” (p. 64). The directions also indicate when to change the script, “*The HYPNOTIST gets the appropriate pieces of script*” (p. 78), and when to address the audience, or when to look at the Hypnotist/Crouch or when to talk through the microphone. Bold print in the script also functions as a kind of embedded stage direction, since it is meant to indicate amplified speech through the microphone. They state as well when to play the music, and at what moment it should stop. As an illustration, the sounds of passing road traffic and the lorry take us back to the place of the accident, “the side of a road” (p. 65); whereas, “O Fortuna” takes us to the Hypnotist’s show. These directions are more of a guideline for the main actor/Hypnotist to use in order to guide the second actor, since s/he enters blindly into the world of the play and depends on the main actor/Hypnotist to navigate its waters. Crouch, however, never instructs the second performer on how to react or feel.

5. SPECTATORIAL AGENCY

5.1. Spectators as Key Element in Crouch’s Theatre

Crouch’s theatre challenges traditional theatre’s belief in the audience’s passivity and, instead, highlights their central role in theatre-making. He advocates for a theatre where audiences are invited to create and imagine scenarios and produce meaning instead of being seduced by images, which resonates with Jacques Rancière’s proposition that “[w]hat is required is a

theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs” (2009, p. 4). Rancière’s ‘emancipated spectator’ views the spectator as non-passive by nature – therefore, the need to turn them into active participants is unfounded. His questioning of the belief in the spectator’s passivity is supported by his effective claim that the act of seeing cannot be considered passive in itself; it is also an action:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. (2009, p. 13)

Crouch re-examines the role of spectators in the theatre, throwing light upon the central position they occupy and moving it forward to the centre of any theatrical experience.

Theatre has always needed an audience – “there is no theatre without a spectator (if only a single, concealed spectator, as in the fictional performance of *Le Fils naturel* that gives rise to Diderot’s *Entretiens*)” (Rancière, 2009, p. 2) – and Crouch is recovering the audience’s pivotal role in meaning-making and theatre-cocreating. He brings to the audience a space for creative opportunities where they can participate, create and decode meaning. Audiences are equipped with the necessary tools to connect with, create and decipher the play; they only need the input to start ‘making’ meaning. For Crouch, words are powerful enough to activate the imagination: “I am, however, passionate about words. Words, and the universes they can create in the audience’s heads”, as he states in the conversation with Svich (2005, n.p.). Whether spectators create the meaning with what they already know or activate some new associations and create new meanings, previous knowledge is the starting point for them to construct meaning, as Helen Freshwater notes, “Much of it works because it depends upon audience members observing the unspoken rules of social interaction – the rituals and conventions which frame our everyday exchanges, as well as our understanding of the conventions which govern appropriate behaviour in a theatre” (2011, p. 408). Additionally, Crouch believes in the intelligence of the audience and to prove it, he exposes theatrical form to reveal deeper emotional truths that spectators unveil through their imaginative and intellectual intervention.

“Intellectual emancipation”, as Rancière calls it, which “ does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations” (2009, p. 10).

Theatre displays or even dissects human behaviour in order to activate a response in the spectator, often by challenging and provoking them. In a letter he wrote in response to an audience member who saw *The Author* and felt betrayed and offended, Crouch reflects on the role of art: “I do not believe it is art’s role to naturalistically imitate reality” (2011, p. 416). That is, his theatre breaks away from naturalistic theatre’s insistence upon mimicking reality, discussed in previous sections. Openly explaining how spectators should interpret, think or react towards a play does not help them perform their active role; on the contrary, it would support the naturalistic theatre’s aim to provide the spectator with one single, pre-cooked ‘message’ or interpretation, as Crouch explains in relation to the often angry reactions to *The Author*: “to state the rules would be to reduce the shared complexity and to reassert the old regime [...]. They require a degree of collective self-determinacy not usually expected in a theatre audience – and maybe this is where the anger starts” (2011, p. 422). Spectators are not used to such exposure, so when they find themselves in such a situation, they are often not sure about how to react.

Theatre’s nature as live performance enhances spectators’ feeling of uniqueness when attending a performance made for and with them; Crouch asserts that “[i]t’s the fact and the sense from an audience that what they are witnessing now will never be seen again, it is just for them, it is different and their involvement in it will also change it. It is not a fixed object. All my work is about trying to uphold that feeling of ‘liveness’” (quoted in Ginman, 2013, p. 133). His theatre aims at keeping the audience involved as active participants and for that purpose, he experiments with a range of techniques. In *The Author*, the actors interact verbally with spectators by asking them their names. This kind of interaction makes the experience unpredictable, as spectators’ reactions are unpredictable; some of them talk back, some of them walk out and some of them send letters in anger (Crouch, 2011). As fellow theatre maker Chris Goode notes on the unpredictability of the idea of the live performance,

A theatre work – such as *The Author* – that sets out to act responsively and sensitively in genuinely meeting its audience will have to build into its own operations an unusual degree of tolerance for that unpredictability, and to live with – and, ideally, thrive in, be nourished by – its doubt and its not-knowing. (2011, p. 466)

The involvement of the audience in the making of the play allows them to see how indispensable they are, since the play's significance depends on them. John Ginman examines David Lane's analysis of Crouch's play, *My Arm*, and indicates the following:

David Lane's analysis of *My Arm*, a show in which objects contributed by members of the audience at the outset are transformed by Crouch's uses of them within a narrative monologue, comments that "the effectiveness of the script's dramaturgy is now dependent on the present and active contributions of the audience": this aspect is integrated with the work's creative use of 'unpredictability'. (2013, p. 133).

Crouch's theatre aims to be open to as many perspectives as spectators, as a smith [Andy Smith] remarks on how hard they –Crouch, Karl James and himself– try "to not presume what the audience are thinking, or fix what we want them to think" (2011, p. 411). In relation to *My Arm*, Ginman confirms that "at the end of the event, each spectator was left to construct their individual narrative of what they had seen, comparing impressions perhaps with friends, whose own version would necessarily have been different" (2013, p. 135). Traditionally theatre has paid more attention to the actor-genius and the psychology of the characters than to the fact that it centrally depends on a two-way relationship between two agents, the artist and the spectators, as Crouch delineates in a post-show talk on *My Arm* held in Madrid (2008, p. 31). Ginman observes in this respect, "an excessive focus on inventing psychologically convincing 'characters' 'may distract the playwright from the more vital task of creating powerful 'roles' that demand public enactment by performers" (2013, p. 136). Moreover, Freshwater emphasizes how false illusions do not help theatre nor give audiences an active role, but rather "give the audience the illusion of freedom" while theatre keeps hiding itself from the spectator's eyes and observations (2011, p. 406). This is exactly what Crouch's theatre tries to unveil; it aims to dismantle such illusion, lay bare theatre's secrets and shows its tricks so the spectator is left to decode signs and assemble meaning.

5.2. Spectators in An Oak Tree

An Oak Tree creates spaces on stage which the audience have to fill with meaning through their imagination: "the more you can leave open, the more an audience is drawn in. And they are drawn in of their own volition", as stated by Crouch in the conversation with Svich (2005, n.p.). To emphasise this, at the beginning of scene 6, Crouch leaves the stage "*for no more than thirty seconds*" (p. 91) leaving a silence on stage which gives the audience time to breathe in the

play, letting it “settle in audience members’ minds, as well as room for spectators to imaginatively flesh out the event” (Love, 2017, p. 54). The action of the play transports spectators from the here-and-now to the past – through flashbacks – and the future – flash-forwards – where they perform the character of an audience watching a hypnotic show in a pub a year from now. The audience’s engagement is highlighted throughout, by the way they take participation in the play performing the role of an audience because they form part of the fictional and ‘real’ world of the play, which makes the audience feel included and needed.

Instructions such as “listen” or “you say”, addressed by Crouch to the second actor, are mechanisms that empower spectators by telling them that all this is possible because they imagine it. To synthesise my conversation with Sorolla about spectators’ role in *An Oak Tree*, the play is not going to do it for them, the play suggests to them fragments of a story which they have to piece together, assemble and create meaning by filling the wholes with their active imagination – the play is not going to do it for them (Appendix). Spectators have full control over the play and construct it at their will; they have agency to decide over what to do with what they imagine and what meaning to infer. In this sense, the second actor’s performance is not central because the play is for the spectator and for them to cocreate.

A play like *An Oak Tree* offers audiences reflections on their strategies as spectators by uncovering the ‘makingof’ theatre and therefore underlining the play’s metatheatrical dimension, as Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte observe on Corcadora Theatre Company’s production of Enda Walsh’s *How These Desperate Men Talk* (2014), which is equally valid for Crouch’s play (2016, p. 10). Yet, *An Oak Tree* does not lose its deep emotional grip on the audience as it takes them through a deep emotive journey precisely by means of this theatrical exposure and transformation. What is fascinating about the play is that spectators are aware that the second actor knows about the play as much – indeed, as little – as they do, and as they witness every one of his/her reactions as the play moves on; maybe they are not happy with the decisions s/he makes or they would make a very different one in that particular situation. Here the unpredictability I discussed earlier comes to the fore; even if the performance goes wrong, it is a good outcome. In the post-show talk that took place in Madrid after a performance of *My Arm*, Crouch stated once again his lack of interest in a kind of theatre that consists in making a series of decisions and choices in rehearsal away from spectators’ eyes, so that they remain hidden. Instead, in *An Oak Tree* he exposes the process before the audience’s eyes. “This is very Brechtian”, he adds (2008, p. 35). What is more, we have to bear in mind that there will be as many reactions and choices as spectators, and even within each one of them individually: “this is a timely reminder of the frequently overlooked fact that different, even discordant

responses take place not only between audience members, but also within each spectator” (Aragay & Monforte, 2016, p. 11; see also Freshwater, 2009, p. 6).

In the Madrid pot-show talk on *My Arm*, Crouch also explained that spectators have such agency in theatre that it is not necessary to cry in front of them to make them believe; it is enough to just say it, and spectators will create the image without the need of seeing it. Every spectator has her/his own image of the ‘character’ crying; thus, what Crouch does is to delegate ‘authority’ to spectators as co-creators of the work at hand. If a certain image of the ‘character’ is actually shown on stage, it would mean imposing one specific image on spectators and thus impeding them creating their own (2008, p. 32). Equally important is the use of an unrehearsed second actor, since it helps reduce the distance between the actors and spectators and bring them closer together. It also makes the audience more aware of its status as audience, and the actors more conscious of their status as actors (Love, 2017, p. 50).

An Oak Tree’s spectators are engaged in a transformative and transformational experience where the transformation is possible because they make it possible. A piano stool is an oak tree, and the oak tree is Claire just because the spectators carry out the transformation and thus make it possible. The fact that the second performer can be a male or female does not change the fact that they play a forty-six-year old male ‘character’ (Crouch, 2008, p. 36). It is not a physical but a metaphysical transformation that is at stake, one which allows the audience to see something else, to imagine. Notwithstanding, spectators are not asked to come onto the stage and ‘perform’ in the strict sense of immersive or interactive theatre. Love traces the possibility of interactive performance in the following analysis:

This is, however, a possibility that is alluded to within the piece. At the very start, the second actor sits among the audience, stepping out from our midst like a volunteer at a hypnotist’s show. When the scene shifts to the actual Hypnotist’s show within the narrative, meanwhile, Crouch is careful to delineate the audience’s role, instructing us *not* to step up when his character asks for volunteers. This constructs the framework of our spectatorship – the ‘rules’ – but also nods towards other possibilities. We could, if we really wanted to, intervene in the performance. (Love, 2017, p. 48-49)

The power of imagination attributed to spectators is shown to us by means of the Father when the Hypnotist tells him that “there wasn’t really a piano” (p. 103), to which the Father replies, “Yes. I played it. I played it earlier” (p. 103). This emphasises how spectators engage in fictions such as *An Oak Tree* and “become emotionally invested in the narrative” (Love,

2017, p. 57). As Bottoms puts it, “[s]pectators take the information they are given, partial and contradictory as it is, and fill out the perceptual and emotional landscape through an investment that, because personal, makes the material all the more intensely felt” (2009, p. 66).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Crouch’s theatre was born out of his frustration as an actor because the naturalistic approach required actors to look, speak and walk like the character they were playing in order to make the audience believe that what is said corresponds to what is seen. Through his theatre, Crouch aims to expose what naturalistic theatre tries to hide – the script, the rehearsals, the theatricality of drama, spontaneous responses – in order to draw attention to the role of spectators. As Crouch states in his conversation with Svich, “I knew that theatre was not only about what happened between actors on stage -- that the majority of people involved in the act were actually sitting beyond the lights, and what they brought to the process was equally important, but regularly ignored” (2005, n.p). By the same token, Crouch’s interest in conceptual art is palpable in his plays, as Delgado-García notes,

There are obvious connections between Crouch’s plays and conceptual art, regarding the not-necessarily-material ontology of the artwork, the importance of concepts and ideas involved in the production and reception of art, the use of everyday materials, and the overt emphasis on the active role of spectators. (2014, p. 82)

In *My Arm*, Crouch foregrounds the dichotomy art permits, whereby one element can be another at the same time. For instance, through biographical language where he narrates in the first person an autobiographical story which is not his own, thus becoming himself and at the same time another. In *England*, he explores two spaces of art, theatre and gallery, brings them together and fills them with the bodies of his spectators; “*ENGLAND* is structured precisely so as to foreground its spectators’ awareness of themselves as bodies in an art gallery, engaged in varying modes of ‘seeing’” (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 448). In the same fashion, *The Author* is a play which “turns its attention to the role of the spectator in art and life. Disturbing both in its form and content” (Bottoms, 2011b, p. 390). It also “removes almost all potential for stage spectacle of its own by removing the stage itself” (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 447), as the four actors sit amongst the audience who face each other throughout as they hear about disturbingly shocking images of rape, decapitation and child abuse. This distribution is harnessed “so that we may look at other people’s reaction, and to be looked at for our own. Spectating is instantiated as an active,

rather than passive, observational process: ‘Look!’” (Bottoms, 2011c, p. 454), thus foregrounding spectatorship as the focus of theatre.

As a response to Michael Craig-Martin’s homonymous work, *An Oak Tree*, the focus of this paper, foregrounds once more Crouch’s concern with conceptual art and the transformational power of imagination. He exposes the way in which theatre is made by bringing into each performance of the play a different actor that has no previous knowledge of or contact with the play. This highlights the liveness of theatre, as Crouch points out in conversation with Dan Rebellato: “And so how exciting to think about theatre as [...] being something more live and something more alert to the moment, rather than alert to a process that has been carefully considered and developed and rehearsed” (2011, p. 18). It is important to stress that the transformation he seeks takes place without any sort of recourse to the processes of naturalistic theatre. It takes place with and within the audience. *An Oak Tree*’s story is about loss and how each individual deals with the pain of loss. The Father chooses to handle it with the help of the power of imagination, which allows him to transform an oak tree into his deceased daughter. It is a compelling emotional journey produced by theatrical exposure and active imaginative participation on the part of spectators.

To conclude with, this paper has explored the ways in which Crouch’s theatre subversively challenges the aesthetics of realistic theatre and the world-view they imply and exposes theatrical form to convey emotional truths, as Svich mentions in her conversation with Crouch (2005, n.p), and as many meanings as spectators there are. All his plays, in one way or another, place their emphasis on the role of spectators in theatre as central to the cocreation of art and meaning making. *An Oak Tree* displays the transformational power of art, whereby a piano stool can be an oak tree, and an oak tree is transformed into a little girl. As analysed in this paper, *An Oak Tree*, and Crouch’s work in general, bring forward Rancière’s notion of the emancipated spectator, namely, the idea that no spectator is passive because seeing is as much a form of action as acting itself. Crouch’s work is based on the belief in spectators’ intelligence and their power to see, not with their retina, but with their minds’ eyes: this is where the transformation takes place.

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Appendix

A Conversation with Luis Sorolla

The following text has been transcribed from audio recordings of Luis Sorolla answering some questions I put to him about An Oak Tree. It also contains a synthesis of the content of some private emails we exchanged regarding the play.

A. Transcripts from audio recordings

La fascinación con *Un Roble* se debe a su conexión con el arte conceptual y el metateatro, no en el sentido de auto-referencia, pero en poner en manifiesto los mecanismos teatrales y aun así levantar emociones y hacer que la función llegue de todas formas.

Tim Crouch dice: “No soy un kamikaze”, es decir, si yo tuviese un personaje confiado y seguro de si mismo, yo no pongo este mecanismo. Lo pongo porque es una traducción escénica de lo que le está pasando al personaje del padre. Crouch primero desarrolla la historia y después el mecanismo y la forma. La última capa que entra es la de la forma y el mecanismo teatral que propone, que es una traducción literal y eficaz de los mismos temas que está tratando *Un Roble* y a la vez es una traducción súper literal de lo que le está sucediendo al personaje.

Trata de un hipnotizador guiando a una persona, haciéndole imaginar cosas a través de la palabra, está haciendo exactamente lo mismo él (Crouch) en la obra con el segundo actor o actriz y lo que hace la obra con el espectador – sugiriendo situaciones a través de la palabra que tus las imagines y construyas en tu cabeza, que es lo que hace cualquier obra de arte. Con respecto al segundo actor/actriz, no había otra opción que las decisiones que él/ella había tomado, pero al ver otro haciendo cosas distintas, ven que realmente hay otras opciones y que son todas igual de válidas. Crouch me dijo que cuando la descripción que tiene en mente del padre se acerca a la del segundo actor/actriz, la intenta cambiar para que sea lo más distinta posible. Desde entonces, intento hacer lo mismo cuando el actor se parece al padre físicamente.

La obra todo el rato está planteando poner a la luz los mecanismos teatrales de cualquier obra. Quiere recordarle al público que esto es una obra, que esto es ficción. Lo que sucede sobre el escenario es un pacto, que sucede porque el público acepta ese pacto. El acto artístico transformativo sucede en el espectador, como dice Crouch. Lo que sucede en escena es un vehículo para que suceda el acto transformativo que lo hace el espectador en su imaginación. Acto de voluntad y de juego que hace el espectador, algo que construyes ‘tú’.

Estas dos personas no son los personajes, estas palabras que dicen están en un guion...todo esto que no se ve en otras obras, aquí está a simple vista para decirle al espectador que esto sucede si crees en ello y lo imaginas. Navega entre varios mecanismos: como coger

un texto y leerlo, el pinganillo, el hipnotizador diciendo las palabras que tiene que decir el segundo actor. Emancipar al espectador, pasarle la antorcha, devolverle el espacio para imaginar. Hacer que la función pertenezca al espectador.

Control: la gente acusa a la obra de ser manipuladora, pero es mucho menos manipuladora que cualquier otra obra teatral que coge un texto, un personaje le da la vuelta, lo desmontan y lo vuelven a montar, analizan a cada gesto, cada acción, cada reacción, cada coma, cada punto... la obra le dice al espectador que ESTA es la verdad sobre la historia, Al contrario, Crouch le dirá al actor qué tiene que hacer pero nunca cómo hacer. El/ella reacciona según la marcha. Muchas historias y muchas formas de enfrentarse a ella (hay tantas como espectadores). Hay muchos huecos y espacios que el espectador rellena y construye. Los lugares donde hay control, están a la vista. El ejercicio no va sobre actuar, sino como diferentes cuerpos transitan la historia escrita de principio a fin como seres humanos más que como actores.

Colores: la sinestesia: como alojar las cosas en lugares que tiene que ver con la idea de alojar a tu hija en un árbol. De repente los lugares, los objetos alojen o asuman una identidad de la misma manera que en el teatro donde una persona asume la identidad o idea de otra que no es la suya. Las instrucciones – ej. “escucha”, “dices” – representan un mecanismo que empodera al espectador diciendo esto sucede porque lo imaginas, y como técnica de hipnosis (presentación, inducción). En la obra hay muchos momentos donde se entra y se sale y eso profundiza la hipnosis. Otra forma de decir imagina esto que te cuento. Ni siquiera te lo vamos a hacer, imagina tú como se dice, constrúyelo tú. Estar presente e imaginar lo que dices, todo en tu cabeza.

Constatar “da igual como lo hagas” la función es para el espectador y para que él imagine. Cambio de papeles: responsabilidad, se le da la vuelta en cierto modo, pero es una trampa porque está escrito, no preguntas lo que quieres. Un momento de relativa piedad hacia el hipnotizador. Actuar: en reacción al segundo actor y cómo reacciona. Hay tantas reacciones como espectadores. Todas las construyen y la imaginan. Mucha gente hace el gesto de coger el volante, o cogiendo un cigarrillo... la gente reacciona de diferentes maneras. Todo lo que te imaginas ha sucedido.

Hay momentos que parece que ni siquiera Crouch sabe quién está hablando porque no se ha pactado, le toca al espectador decidir quién está hablando en esas escenas. Rellenar huecos, rellenar significados. Ven cosas que no se han hecho y la función es lo que ha visto el espectador. A veces el espectador sabe más sobre la historia y la posiciona mejor que el segundo actor.

B. Summary of e-mails

La estructura de la obra está un poco organizada como un proceso hipnótico, eso nos decía el hipnotizador que nos estuvo ayudando en los ensayos. Presentación, inducción, etc. Y los cortes y salir y entrar tantas veces tienen que ver con una técnica de profundización del trance. Luego, efectivamente, la obra tiene una división curiosa con lo que comentas del primer acto, etc. Yo personalmente creo que la razón por la que marca lo del primer acto y todo lo demás no es por varios motivos. Pero esto son elucubraciones mías: en lo que sería ese primer acto la obra transcurre prácticamente sin saltos temporales, como una única escena con unidad temporal y de espacio excepto por los momentos en los que el padre está en la carretera (¿Es un flashback, es él imaginando, recordando, hipnotizado?). Entonces cuando todo explota al final del primer acto, ese momento marca un gran cambio de dinámica. Verbalizar final del primer acto creo que ayuda al segundo actor/actriz a entender que aquí empieza otra cosa, otra parte si se quiere. También ayuda al espectador a situarse en lo mismo. Y también me parece muy guay que solo haya una señalización con respecto a la estructura de la obra. Puede ser que sea una obra en dos actos y por eso no se dice nada más.

Para mí, la obra y la forma se empieza a romper mucho más a partir de ese segundo acto, estamos más perdidos en forma y estructura, en el orden cronológico de las cosas, se mezcla si están hablando hipnotizador y padre o si los dos actores, qué es texto qué no... Creo que el reflejo de que la obra se vaya rompiendo y que cada vez estemos más perdidos y la experiencia más fragmentada es un reflejo de la experiencia que está viviendo Andy, y que deje de haber señales de la estructura e la obra ahonda en esa pérdida, en esa ausencia de orden y de estructura. Cada vez más, el segundo actor o actriz tiene menos a lo que agarrarse: pasamos de una cosa a otra de manera más súbita, hacemos escenas en las que no sé si soy personaje o actor, me quitan el pinganillo, me dejan solo... La obra se va rompiendo y hay menos acompañar. De ahí que no haya más referencias a la estructura. Y la propia obra se va rompiendo también.

El uso de guiones (-): es aquello que tú como espectadora o como lectora entiendas. Tu lectura como espectadora es la verdad de la función porque ha sido tu experiencia, lo que sea que estoy planteando yo es lo de menos. Y aparte, creo que tiene que ver con que: el hipnotizador no quiere hacer lo que está haciendo, se siente un fracasado, aparte después de lo que ha pasado lo último que quiere es ponerse a entretener y divertir a gente, se siente un fraude y un asesino. Son bolos de compromiso y hay que hacerlos. Además, ya no me sale, el show va a ser un fracaso y va a ser humillante, así que soy el primero que me la suda y que no me

tomo en serio y ya que hay que hacer esta puta mierda pues que pase cuanto antes, no me lo tomo en serio yo el primero y ya está. Y por eso yo también trabajo que he bebido alcohol. En cualquier caso, Tim Crouch lo interpreta súper neutro, dejando al espectador que decida qué es lo que está pasando y por qué es así. Lo que está claro es que es una súper decisión por parte del autor que responde a algo. Hay quienes dicen que es lenguaje hipnótico y que tiene que ver con la inducción, etc., y que es el intento del personaje por hacer el ‘show’ pero que es malo. Pero a mí me parece que es una ‘intro’ que fracasa por lo circunstancial, y si la ‘intro’ siempre hubiera sido así, el hipnotizador sería un fraude y sería malo y yo creo que este hipnotizador es un mal hipnotizador después del accidente, pero que antes del accidente era bueno, sabía lo que hace y cómo hacerlo y no es un fraude. Etc.

El “O Fortuna” es la misma canción que propone por acotación para la presentación del ‘show’ de hipnosis del personaje del hipnotizador. De ahí que nosotros, aunque cambiásemos la canción que utilizaba nuestro personaje del hipnotizador, repetíamos su uso en la escena 8. Creo que el paralelismo es ese: volver a decir "vamos a hacer un ejercicio de hipnosis, un espectáculo de hipnosis". Es la música prototipo de espectáculo de hipnosis y de generar expectativa del hipnotizador, ha sido utilizada como signo de esa presentación del show del hipnotizador; y entonces, antes de esa escena final en la que se le propone (o por lo menos así lo entendimos nosotros) de manera más explícita al espectador el "vamos a hipnotizarte, juega", se repite el uso del mismo signo para decir: estamos hablando de lo mismo. Un ejercicio de hipnosis.