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Abstract

The paper discusses Philippe le Guay's film *Alceste à bicyclette* (2013) through the lenses of the historical controversy generated by the pressure to choose between the two main characters of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* - Alceste and Philinte - as incarnations of two radically different temperaments and moral attitudes. Besides its obvious intertextual links to the famous 17th-century piece, as well as its outstanding appreciation of the art of acting - and of the role of ageing in the acting profession - the film is, however, intriguing insofar as it not only produces but also explicitly thematises a clash between the supposed out-datedness of the classical comedy and the fact that placed in the new context, the genre nevertheless manages to reinstate its initial subversive impact.

Keywords: Molière, *Le Misanthrope*, *Alceste à bicyclette*, acting, theatre-within-film

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Alceste à bicyclette and Molière's Melancholic Comedy: A Rejuvenation or a Turn Off?

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My contribution concerns a rather complex, although not necessarily a very fashionable and popular topic, namely the archetypal quality of the classical, or classicist, comedy and its eventual contemporary uses and/or reverberations. I decided to address this question since the very issue of “the survival of comedy”, which suggests both the obstacles this survival encountered and the actual resilience of the genre, necessarily presupposes taking account of its full historical arch to be then able to discuss its modern, or should I say post-modern – or post-dramatic – or no-longer dramatic reformulations. I could have perhaps picked up the topic of contemporary *mise-en-scènes* of classical comedies. However, I chose to discuss a relatively strange or rare case of theatre-within-film for two interconnected reasons, the first being, of course, the fact that the film I am going to talk about, *Alceste à bicyclette*, reinterprets one of Molière's most famous pieces, *Le Misanthrope* – about which I have for a long time dreamt of writing – but the second, more generally relevant, reason has to do with the meta-theatrical and meta-generic implications of this trans-medial hybrid, that is, in this specific case, with the fact that the film I have chosen engages in the explicit and implicit reflection upon the pertinent features, the legacy and the eventual appeal a classical comedy could have for the contemporary audience, whether in the theatre or the cinema.

The 350th anniversary of Molière's death – which in 2023 followed the previous, more joyful, 400th anniversary of the playwright's birth – certainly prompts one to remember that the French actor and author is deemed to have invented a new kind of comedy, called in French, *la grande comédie*, or, in English, high comedy. The latter term, however, does not exactly match the sense of the French coinage since it does not necessarily mean a comedy of the salon but mostly refers to the more lofty or more serious – satirical and other – ambitions that Molière wanted to attribute to what was in his time considered to be a lower-ranked genre nearing the vulgarity of the farce. Let me, therefore, remind you that the playwright himself never refrained from absorbing farcical features and episodic moments into his plays, such as *lazzis* and other comic

situations from *commedia dell'arte*, combining them with the rules of the construction of the plot and with the endless permutations of a few stock elements inherited from Plautus and *commedia erudita*. Molière added to these not only the length of a five-act play but also rhetorically and philosophically demanding tirades. Often, however, in doing so, he shattered the joyful logic of the genre by thwarting pending marriages, as in *Les Femmes savantes*, or by making the plot lead to closely escaped tragic endings, as in *Tartuffe*, or, indeed, by introducing truly fateful, unhappy ones, in which – as in *Don Juan* – characters do die on the stage (or rather, under it, since Don Juan is at the end ineluctably pulled by the Commander down to the underworld).

One of the most representative pieces, and the most commented upon, of this new, more complex, if not even, so to speak, more “realistic” genre which came to be called *comédie de caractère* – and was conceived to match the status of tragedy Molière never had the chance to excel in despite his initial fervent efforts – remains to this day *Le Misanthrope*, a play that generated numerous and harshly conflicting interpretations whose sheer number made its contradictory protagonist Alceste rank among the kin of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, being equally susceptible, as John Simon would put it, to become an emblematic embodiment “of the various sensibilities of individuals in different eras, indeed of the collective sensibilities of these eras themselves” (404). Surely, it is appropriate to evoke here the most famous of all theatre characters in the Western tragic tradition, since Alceste and Hamlet do share many traits, first of all, a most disturbing state of mind – disturbing, that is, for the surrounding characters, and, in Alceste’s case, for the very spirit of comedy – namely, melancholy. Like Hamlet, Alceste also feels and craves isolation from his immediate and broader social circle. He also accuses the woman he loves of coquettishness and betrayal and, also like Hamlet, cultivates a keen interest and refinement in matters of ethics and aesthetics. We could even say that he as well harbours suicidal thoughts, for hanging oneself is the idea that reappears a couple of times during the play. We have equally strong reasons to realise that all this fussing about the perniciousness of human nature is, to a large extent, symptomatic of a ridiculous, choleric¹ and narcissistic self-dramatisation, a generically misplaced perception the hero has of himself as a misfit and tragic outcast, while, in fact, eagerly yearning to be distinguished by the very society that he rejects and loved by the woman who incarnates all the mundane evils he so adamantly condemns.

¹ I thank Professor Jure Gantar for inquiring, after my lecture, on Molière’s reliance on the theory of humours and the typology of personalities derived from it, which is in the background, for instance, of some plays of the Elizabethan period in England. The full title of the French play is (*Le Misanthrope, ou l’atrabilaire amoureux*, which would suggest such a connection. Indeed, *atrabilaire* referred at the time to the “black bile”, which originally suggested the prevalence of the melancholic mood coupled with “intellectual and moral seriousness” (cf. Morgan 299), while “yellow bile” was supposed to characterise the choleric, that is, an irritable and bad-tempered man. In time, however, *atrabilaire* lost its lofty melancholic association and acquired meanings usually accruing around a choleric type: *acariâtre, acerbe, aigre, coléreux, irascible, renfrogné, revêche* (Dictionnaire Larousse). Molière seems to play with both connotations – and that is why, as shall be argued in this article, his protagonist remains such an ambivalent figure and a puzzle since his comicality seems to result precisely from the tension between the melancholic and the choleric sides of his nature.

Our awareness that Molière himself has played the part only adds to the suspicions that melancholy is perhaps not the dominant mode/mood of the piece, that the actor's interpretation must have contributed to farcical situations and performative accents the comedy also contains – the battle of the sexes, the quarrel between the would-be tyrant and a clever woman who deceives him, the expressive miming and extravagant gestures suggested to be accompanying Alceste's abrupt comings and goings before and after his quarrelsome confrontations². And yet, as Andrew Calder hurries to add after having enumerated these farcical aspects of the *Misanthrope*, the comedy also displays some of the structural features of tragedy, for “characters in farce and tragedy equally are victims of their own temperaments; their inflexibility is a kind of fate”; in the *Misanthrope* specifically, they are “so saddled with their particular temperaments and worldviews that no amount of affection or love can change them” (96). Knowing indeed what kind of fate awaits Alceste and Célimène, we have to admit that, after all, instead of following the age-old comic formula and celebrating a happy marital union, they do end up being almost tragically ill-matched and therefore have to separate, leaving the stage to a more auspicious marriage between Célimène's cousin Éliante and Alceste's friend Philinte.

Ever since the 1950s, theatre directors, as well as a couple of cinematic ones³, have delighted in putting the play on stage or filming it in modern dress, often, however, to emphasise precisely its gloomy, if not downright tragic undertones, as Patrice Pavis recently demonstrated in his commentary of the three most prominent theatre versions of the play in the new millennium, by Jean-Pierre Miquel (Comédie-Française, Vieux-Colombier, 2000), Stéphane Braunschweig (Théâtre National de Strasbourg, 2003) and Clément Hervieu-Léger (Comédie-Française, 2017), in particular. Michael Edwards wrote about the same phenomenon in his recently re-edited book titled *Molière's laughter, Le rire de Molière*, in which he exposes such attempts at pessimistically re-configuring the comedy to be a result of an “error of interpretation” that thoroughly misses the original comic point of *The Misanthrope*, which was, after all, to make Molière's contemporaries laugh at their own inadequacies, both as individuals and as members of a highly ritualised and therefore necessarily hypocrite society (141). Now, this proneness to take Alceste in particular seriously is a tendency said to be stemming from the notorious attack on Molière's cruel ridiculing of the protagonist mounted by Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose admiration for Alceste is often evoked as a mark of a new, republican sensibility. But, when encountered today, it makes one wonder where and why the hilarious aspect of the comedy vanished and whether this propensity for tears over the misunderstood loner and the love gone wrong is

2 As Herzl rightly puts it, “We may regret that we cannot see Molière perform the leading roles of *L'Amour médecin* or *Le Médecin malgré lui* or *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, but it is not likely that this loss has fundamentally altered our understanding of the tone of those plays. But Molière himself in the role of Alceste? Our loss is incalculable, and we need to be reminded of that fact” (348).

3 Bernard Dhéran in 1958 and Pierre Dux in 1971.

the sign of our times, whether it testifies to a kind of moralistic sentimentalism and the current impossibility to actually humorously confront the very mixed feelings generated by the play's intricacies, let alone to savour its hidden meta-dramatic irony.

The entire history of the critical reception of the play could, to be sure, figure as such a sign of the not-so-changing times after all, for even well before Rousseau, from the very start of the stage fortune of the *Misanthrope*, rare have been the members of the public who have found this comedy funny, so that for long it suffered a moderate success in the theatre and was even proclaimed to be more of a good reading than a title promising an enjoyable performance. Such a critical stance of both the public and the critics of Molière's age, according to Lionel Gossman, could itself be considered as proof of their own melancholic disposition: on many accounts, Alceste managed to intimately relate to the 17th-century spectator, representing as the protagonist does a rightful if not righteous melancholic resentment of the domesticated nobility which reluctantly acquiesced to the rules of Louis XIV's court, where sickness and melancholy were not abided, and any public manifestation of withdrawal was considered to be "inadmissible, a provocation, a dangerous indication of dissidence and potential subversiveness" (334). Since Molière was however dependent upon the king's protection and therefore expected to subscribe to all the aims of the new absolutist state, according to Gossman, he simply had to make this "type" appear as a "comic figure", much like the rest of his comic paternal tyrants, who are all, like Alceste, "preoccupied with conservation and retention, dead set against novelty, mobility, change, and exchange, the circulation of goods and of money, the free circulation of women and of signs – everything that might unsettle the established order of things" (328).

Nevertheless, many a later critic of *Misanthrope* continued to be puzzled by the ambiguities that permeate the play and hardly tolerated not taking sides when it comes to the principal character and, with it, the generic atmosphere he generates: judging from the accumulated interpretations, one often simply has to choose, either the protagonist is a misogynistic, irrational choleric, the society which he attacks because of its hypocrisy is in the right, and the piece is a comedy, or Alceste is an upright and truthful man, and, as we heard, a politically subversive melancholic, the society outrageously unjust and the piece is a drama with an almost tragic ending. No wonder such an ambiguity proved to be a favourable ground for a fine typology proposed by the psychoanalytic critic Francesco Orlando, who saw in these contentions various manifestations of the effects of the comic repression of the seriousness of the issues at stake (259–261):

Variant A – the serious is unconscious because the comic structure represses it;

Variant B – the serious is conscious but not accepted; the comic structure precariously wins over;

Variant C – the serious is accepted but not advocated; the comic structure is just a façade, a concession made to the king;

Variant D – the serious is advocated but not authorised (*littérature engagée*).

I do not have enough time here to enter into the details of his argumentation, so let me point out that, according to Orlando, an astonishing number of critics find it hard to tolerate variants A and B, in which there is a precarious balance between the comic and the serious, whether the latter is repressed or acknowledged, and rather opt for the rest of the two, in which the seriousness prevails, even though Orlando's analysis manages to prove to what extent variants C and D are rather difficult to back up by the close structuralist reading that he provides in his study.

Be that as it may, the play stirred such opposite reactions due largely also to two strange couplings in which the protagonist is placed, the first an amicable and the second an amorous one, in such a way that the aforementioned siding of the audience often depends upon sympathies it cultivates for either the unwaveringly offended Alceste on one side, or his socialite companions on the other – Philinte, his wise but somewhat complaisant friend, and the gossip-mongering Célimène, the woman with whom Alceste claims to be in love. No matter how important Célimène's role turns out to be as the play progresses – paired with her cousin Éliante as the alternative lover vengefully courted for a moment by Alceste – it is the opposition between the two men that mostly divides the critics, so notoriously that it has even been taken as an example of scholarly absurdities by Proust's Albertine, as Norman Henfrey finds important to note: if Alceste is seen as “a pure and truthful soul”, as Goethe pronounced him, then Philinte becomes “the flatterer, a false-hearted man of the world”, “the personification of egoism, craven compromise and self-satisfaction”; if, on the other hand, Alceste is perceived as “sour tempered”, then Philinte becomes the man to be preferred as a friend, or “the wise man whom one would do well to strive to emulate, full of that breeding and discerning politeness found in the best company” (160–161). That is also why the first scene of the comedy – the eloquent confrontation of the raging Alceste and the composed Philinte, which is considered to represent what Henfrey calls “the philosophical bone of contention worried over by the two friends” (185) – has to this day fared as *the scene* that sets the tone for the whole piece, so much so that the way any director or production crew decides to interpret it often also provides the key to both the characterological and the generic frame in which the whole performance is to be read and experienced.

Furthermore, it is precisely with this scene that Louis Jovet, the legendary actor and director of the early 20th-century French cartel of directors, begins his book *Molière et la comédie Classique* (1965/2022), in which he bestows his lessons on acting: the first chapter of the book is in fact entirely devoted to the first scene of *Misanthrope*,

which, when performed, should in Jovet's view primarily not only establish the often totally neglected, and yet pivotal and complex amicable, relationship between the two men but also give space and breadth to the inexpressible and enigmatic aspect of the two characters, which for him held equal importance for the play's universe – Philinte being, according to him, the more intelligent and more knowledgeable man in matters of social intercourse, the one who exhibits protection of his friend, and Alceste being more intrepid in his endeavours to bring his beloved woman back to her senses. Jovet famously insisted on actors simply enunciating the words in the right rhythm and with the right respiration; he urged his students to let go of any preconceived ideas of what the verses might mean and declared the following:

On ne sera jamais Alceste. Alceste est un personnage qui existe avant nous, et qui existera après nous. A soixante-dix ans, quand tu seras un grand comédien et un grand homme, car il faut être un grand homme pour jouer Alceste, tu joueras Alceste, mais tu ne seras pas Alceste; tu mourras et Alceste vivra (18).

No one will ever be Alceste. Alceste is a character who existed before us and will exist after we are long gone. At the age of seventy, when you shall become an actor of stature and a man of stature, since one has to be a man of stature to play Alceste, you shall play Alceste, but you shall not be Alceste: you shall die, and Alceste shall live.

Is, then, Alceste still alive? Has the comedy he dominates survived Jovet himself? Are we moderns capable of bypassing Rousseau's dictum on the piece to rather recognise in the protagonist what Hans Robert Jauss called "the paradox of the *Misanthrope*", that is, both his ridiculous and his subversive aspects? Jauss's study is worth recalling since he rightly points out the special case of the misanthrope as a character, the fact that "to feel oneself the enemy of mankind would go against nature and the social condition of human existence", which means that a literary creation of such character type represents "a limiting case created to test and explore what human nature is", and thus a chance for a contemporary critic to observe the very "changing horizons of characterology" (307) which underpins comedy as a classical genre. This trajectory leads the critic from classical anthropology, via the Christian conception of human nature and its secularised, 19th- and 20th-century variants, to its contemporary vicissitudes.

It is with this literary, anthropological, critical and, in Jovet's case, acting-pedagogic background in mind that the French film director Phillippe Le Guay and actor Fabrice Lucchini – aged 72 – decided to envisage a sort of cinematic remake of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* which would primarily, as it appears from the plot, concentrate upon the unlikely friendship of the two contrasting characters – the righteous, intransigent, impatient, angry, jealous and self-obsessed loner, moralist and aesthete Alceste, on the one hand, and the good-humoured, polite, confident, amused conversationalist and

somewhat cynical *honnête homme*, that is, typical French *salonnier*, Philinte, on the other. Instead, however, of simply transposing Molière's comedy into contemporary ambience, dress and manners, which would require finding some justification for the use of alexandrines – much more easily accepted as a convention when the play is modernised on the stage – the authors made the two characters become contemporary theatre, film and TV actors, Serge and Gauthier, not only displaying the same character traits – Serge, played by Lucchini, as Alceste, and Gauthier, played by Laurent Wilson, as Philinte – but also competing to interpret, in the theatre production mounted by Gauthier, either the preeminent, colourful and contradictory Alceste, or the usually bland and secondary Philinte, who may as a character appear to be as complex, and fare much better in the society of Molière's times, but is generally not perceived either as an acting challenge or as a role that brings spotlight, whether on or off the stage.

The situation is all the more comic since the seemingly well-intentioned Gauthier, whom we see to be a highly popular and well-paid actor in soap operas, is the one who, eagerly wanting to finally interpret Alceste, besieges Serge, an experienced theatre actor, to agree to play Philinte in his production. However, Serge voluntarily retired some time ago from the acting profession and, disgusted by the entire cultural industry, retreated, in a true Alcestian manner, to a kind of desert island, l'île de Ré, where he lives in a destitute house, without enough money to pay even for the rotten sewer pipes. Serge nevertheless plays hard to get, and Gauthier is forced to stay on the island in order to win him over, initially agreeing that they alternate the roles, at least while rehearsing, but finally suddenly deciding that he will be the one to play Alceste, upon which decision, however, Serge falls in one of his typical tantrums, refuses the deal and blunts to Gauthier's wife that her husband cheated on her with the attractive Italian Francesca, played by Maya Sansa, who also came to the island in need of some peace after her divorce. One can recognise in her the contemporary variant of Célimène, or should we say Éliante, since she forms the only actual erotic triangle involving the two friends in the original *Misanthrope*. Although herself a moralist much like Éliante, who also admires Alceste but finally marries Philinte, the freshly divorced Francesca shares with Célimène her former marital experience, independent spirit, aloofness and mystery, as well as the charm she has for Serge, who turns to be somewhat clumsy and awkward in matters of love, not to speak of jealousy he feels for Gauthier for his repeated love affairs and easy-going manners with women, besotted as they all turn out to be by the latter's fame and money.

Through its ironic metatheatrical redoubling of comic constellations inherited from Molière, the plot thus redeploys the narcissistic subtext of the comedy diagnosed by Lacan to be a kind of madness shared by the entire society and comically denied of having been subjected to by the protagonist (173–176) – a madness only growing in size and perniciousness in a neoliberal epoch and its "*société du spectacle*", as

French situationists would call it, much worse in that respect than the French 17th-century aristocratic milieu. Besides featuring the aforementioned parallelisms in the construction of the protagonist and his social interactions, as also in the meagre plot that only serves to make the characters emerge as ridiculously self-centred, this cinematic re-enactment of the *Misanthrope's* entanglements, like the original, does not refrain from farcical moments – sights of lascivious canvasses that Serge paints in his hours of solitude, repeated falls of both friends' into the river while riding old timer bicycles, abrupt fights with annoying taxi-drivers, etc. Underneath, however, the telling structural analogies and inversions with respect to the original comedy, the film also hides a subtle melancholic undertone, whose effect cannot be reduced solely to the fatal misunderstanding between Serge and his social environment, let alone to his lost chances for renewed professional affirmation and emotional fulfilment.

The film's somewhat smuggled topic concerns, namely, the issue of age, human age, of course, and the age, the kind of epoch in which humans happen to be forced to realise their humanity and "nature". In the original *Misanthrope*, apart from preaching ultimate sincerity in human relationships, Alceste also appears to be an inadvertent *laudator temporis acti*: not only he rejects Oronte's love sonnet by extolling the worth and beauty of traditional folk poetry as a counterexample, but he also, as we have already said, cultivates a misplaced perception of himself as a heroic and tragic outcast from society – as a kind of archaic, Cornelian hero seeking spectacular martyrdom, who then inevitably turns out to be grotesquely unfitting for the comedic, primarily social and conversational context of a woman's salon. However, Alceste's conservatism is all too often automatically linked to his supposed middle age, an interpretive assumption fortified by critics' knowledge that Molière was 44 when he acted the role. Not all commentators, however, agree on that point: concurring in this respect with Lionel Gossman, who also insists on Alceste's paradoxical youth – paradoxical since, as we heard, the protagonist in many respects occupies the comedic "slot of the old man lusting after an inappropriate young woman" (Gossman 325) – the Serbian theatre scholar Ivan Medenica – who, by the way, also sees *Le Misanthrope* as a tragedy – argues that there are plenty of reasons indeed for assuming that Alceste is very young, a man in his twenties, since he is courting a very young woman of the same age, and, being free from any family or social obligations, is allowed to display the kind of intolerant temperament which is entirely fitting for a young, impassioned nature, prone to reject social hypocrisies, and apparently so different from Philinte in behaviour only insofar the latter is more mature, and therefore also protective and caring of his younger friend (67–92).

The situation in the film is, to a large extent, inverse: Serge and Gauthier seem to be peers, but here Serge – the actor supposedly sharing Alceste's nature – is the one who looks older, resigned and resentful, while Gauthier in order to maintain his worldly

and professional success, does everything to look, dress and behave as someone younger than his age. Gauthier's aesthetics, moreover, mirrors his ethics: unlike Serge, who patronises the soap opera actor on questions of diction and comprehension, Gauthier does not care for Louis Jouvet's famous lessons on the best way to play a classical comedy, and especially Molière's *Misanthrope* – all he cares for is to capitalise on its canonicity and to reach a wider audience, or, as he professes, to “touch its heart”. That issues of the actor's age are a hidden line of interest in this film comedy is further corroborated by two significant episodes: besides Francesca, in the village, there is a young and sexy aspiring actress, Zoe, played by Laurie Bordesoules, who, however prefers a more lucrative career of a pornographic star, although, when invited to rehearse the role of Célimène with the two actors, she proves to be very talented, eliciting in her companions both lust and sighs of admiration expressing anticipated nostalgia for the talented youth so wasted. Moreover, when Serge one evening dances with Francesca, irritated by Gauthier's attempts at seducing her with his knowledge of the Italian language, Francesca starts whispering in Serge's ear the famous lines in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: *Nel mezzo del cammin della mia vita, mi ritrovai in una selva oscura ...* Serge is, however not in his thirties as Dante's character is in the *Divine Comedy*, but – even if one must admit that his retirement seems somewhat premature – he certainly feels the *selva oscura* of death approaching.

Pretending that it is due to the feeling of betrayal by one of his previous best friends and movie directors, who now sues him for having left the set before the film has been finished – just like Alceste is sued in *The Misanthrope*, and just like Serge himself is again running the risk to be sued by Gauthier – Serge, in fact, belies his feelings of epochal maladjustment: during the rehearsals, he explodes over Gauthier's dependence upon the mobile phone calls, he is not able to understand the universal irreverence when it comes to Molière's and Jouvet's legacy, and he is horrified by the vacuity of soap operas through which Gauthier gained his popularity, not to speak of the x-films which the young Zoe wants to star in. The use of classical comedy and his acting expertise seem to him to be no longer valid and deservedly appreciated. When he provocatively decides to come to Gauthier's party dressed as a true 17th-century nobleman, the anachronism is complete: infuriated by some bystanders who entreat him to recite a couple of verses from the comedy in order to entertain them, Serge provokes the final scandal before the entire crew of fellow actors, comforted in finding the situation and the verses he so likes to be confirming the rigid view that he had all along, since the beginning of the plot, of humanity irrevocably heading towards not only a moral but also a cultural disaster. In a way, the end of the film does him justice, for in the penultimate scene, we first see Gauthier playing Alceste to a rather mediocre, anonymous actor as Philinte, and suddenly realising that he, Gauthier made a mistake in diction which had been repeatedly pointed to him by Serge during their rehearsals – a mistake that prevents him from continuing the performance. On the

other hand, the very last scene that follows shows us Serge on a desert beach reciting the same verses concerning the hatred of humanity with an expression of utter, epiphanic, though also, of course, somewhat melancholic exhilaration on his face.

Despite its overall light atmosphere, which measuredly mixes the inserted recitations of classical alexandrines with characteristic phrasings of contemporary dialogue, the film thus manages to reinstate, if not further complicate, the paradox and ambiguity of the original comedy, since here the melancholic protagonist not only takes himself to be the sole guardian of the dying spirit of classical comedy but also insists that its current devaluation is no laughing matter. To play with the notorious essay on melancholy by Freud a bit, we might say that, just as Serge the actor incorporates Molière's comedy as the lost object of his desire and mourning and delights in ritually evoking its verses even though there is no audience to watch him and listen to him, so also the film incorporates substantial parts of *The Misanthrope*, running the same risk as its protagonist, given that the release of the film has unfortunately been accompanied by the same remarks regarding its own epochal maladjustment – the supposed overblown allegiance to Molière that it displays, which might intimidate modern viewers⁴.

The question remains: is the *grande comédie*, or the comedy of character, thereby rejuvenated or a turn-off? Before we rush to proclaim the French 17th-century “character comedy” to be anachronistic, we should perhaps lend our ears to recent anamneses of the regulatory force with which the contemporary neoliberal capitalism displays a certain “turn to the character”, as Kim Allen and Anna Bull recently called its moral effects, an ideology, that is, imposing certain affective, cultural and psychic features as the “right” kind of dispositions for surviving in society – confidence, resilience and positive mental attitude, let alone, we could add, availability to constant gregariousness and overall alertness in social networking – all qualities more pertaining to youth and its promises, than to the old age. Any comedy attempting to truly engage with this ideology inevitably faces the task of humorously exposing its repressed content, namely, the resulting marginalisation of melancholic inadaptability and ageing as such. Nevertheless, even if we accepted the strain, the genre thus suffers, for its tradition is to celebrate youth and its victories over decrepit elders; simply focusing on the maladjustment of ageing and wilfully solitary individuals in contemporary neoliberal society hardly makes for a truly daring comedy challenging the status quo. Having in mind the warnings that by referring to Molière's *Misanthrope*, the film itself runs the risk of alienating the modern audience, I will therefore suggest that – to use the typology suggested by Alenka Zupančič, her opposition between the truly disturbing “stand up” and the conformist, “sit down” comedy⁵ – the kind of

⁴ See the review by James Travers on <http://www.frenchfilms.org/review/alceste-a-bicyclette-2013.html>.

⁵ The lecture was delivered on 16 June 2019 at the European Graduate School, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DKsuU5T0qs>.

“stand up” effect that *Alceste à bicyclette* performs has perhaps also a lot to do with the current conundrum pertaining to cultural hierarchies and with the overall, academic included, enthusiasm for all things popular, inevitably entailing the supposed anachronism of the very classical comedy that both ridiculed a melancholic stance and, by making it subversive of any kind of institutional repression, consecrated its provocative potential in the first place. The invocation of the *Misanthrope* thus reinstates the crisis of moral and aesthetic judgement that once upon a time made it so modern, and that made any taking sides with the characters uneasy, a challenge to choose the kind of cultural capital one would like to be associated with – and, upon choosing, the kind of social risk to be exposed to. In the case of *Alceste à bicyclette*, it is therefore up to us to decide whether we prefer to be denounced as a stubborn, conservative, narrow-minded and inflexible classicist or as a calculating, fashion-driven liberal if not pseudo-leftist populist. Now if such troubling of the high-minded audience is not the true calling of a high comedy, I do not know what is.

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