

Music and songs in John McGrath's works : ethically rooted popular aesthetics

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Music and songs are constant elements in popular theatre and particularly in political protest drama in Britain. A key contributor to such ethically designed aesthetics is John McGrath from the 1970s to 1990s, in Liverpool first, then in Scotland. Designing new thematics and forms, he acknowledges inheriting key influences. Through a descriptive analysis of the specificities of his contribution, the present paper will also pay homage to John McGrath's predecessors, thus sketching out some marking lines of British popular musical theatre throughout the twentieth century.

After quite a successful individual early career in Oxford and London, J. McGrath's association with Alan Dossor, the director of the Everyman Theatre in a popular district of Liverpool, in 1971, inevitably symbolically marked a popular change of purpose as the reference of the place to Middle Age tradition anticipated the playwright's aims. J. McGrath immediately wrote six short plays he entitled *Unruly Elements* (Everyman, February 1971, followed by a national tour from 1971 to 1973). The *Plugged In* trilogy (published in *Plays and Players* in November 1972, broadcasted on BBC-2 Television on 13 January 1973) was derived from that set of plays. It chose the form of comical Middle Age ballads with local popular dialects along with giant symbolic objects hanging behind the players and singers. Reflecting the social condition and preoccupations of Liverpudlians, they drew large audiences. Yet, the scarce use of songs did not satisfy the playwright who then successfully wrote *Soft or a Girl?* (November 1971, 7:84 tours, 1974-1975). Interviewed by Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, J. McGrath notes :

The Everyman was not getting the audience it deserved. So, I sat down and wrote *Soft or a Girl?*, a Liverpool play with loads of songs and lots of comedy, lots of local involvement and a serious theme. The form was nearer to a concert with scenes than anything else/.../. This was overlapping with the beginnings of 7:84.¹

The play borrows from pop and rock music on which the author put lyrics with locally rooted social meaning and style, and, in the playwright's views "just a little bit off the pop idiom, slightly more articulate, more literary, because they were to be listened to." J. McGrath then wrote *Fish in the Sea* (December 1972, revised for the 7:84 tour starting at the London Half Moon Theatre on 15 February 1975). That social parabolic fresco of "threatened work" is centered around the Maconochies, a Liverpoolian working-class family. *Sunday Telegraph's* critic Frank Marcus, wrote about the 1978 tour:

A wonderful generosity of spirit akin to O'Casey at his best informs the work of J. McGrath. His plays rarely reach London: a fault which will surely be rectified when the National Theatre opens its portals to the regions. *Fish in the Sea* confirms my long held view that McGrath is one of our major dramatists. His epic vision is allied to an ear for speech rhythms which can establish a character in seconds, his humour and all embracing sympathy are heartwarming. His failure to be doctrinaire and inability to hate are precisely the reasons why *Fish in the Sea* carried conviction.²

With soon written and staged *Lay Off* and *Rat Trap*, a total of four new musical touring shows were brought to largely new and untried audiences in the Welsh valleys and in Scotland. Their wholly fresh and intriguing style was certainly new to popular audiences. Meanwhile, with the Scottish tour, J. McGrath, his wife Elizabeth MacLennan, and some native friends created the Scottish branch of their company for whom J. McGrath adapted *Soft or a Girl* to make it *My Pal and Me*, a Glasgow version of that Liverpool musical. This process of finding a vivid popular form soon developed in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*³ which made the author famous nationwide. This historical play with lots of variety and a few jokes, reinvented the form of the traditional Highland Ceilidh of the nineteenth century which, in its time, reinforced the gaelic culture with a political getting-on together. Yet, beyond regional rooting sources, J. McGrath also paid a tribute to a famous national predecessor, Joan Littlewood

Popular British theatre is inevitably identified with her contribution. She discovered Brecht and working-class theatre in the 1930s and married Ewan Mc Coll, a singer in a working-class theatre company in Manchester. The name of that company itself, "The Red

Megaphone' reveals the object and sympathies of the troupe. Created in 1930, that agit-prop group had taken its name from the most famous German such group : the Rote Sprechrohr. An international movement bound similar groups all over the world in a common purpose to dramatise the social and political issues of the time, using expressionist and popular forms among which music and song held a strong part. The peak of the Red Megaphone's street activity and involvement was during the Lancashire textile strikes of 1932, under the leadership of young James Miller, who soon made a name for himself as the folk singer Ewan McColl. The sketches thus assembled to reflect the workers' grievances and bitterness almost took, without the players knowing it, a form close to the Mumming plays, particularly the *Seven Champions of Christendom* (McColl, 1973, 58). Such Middle Age vivid cultural tradition would also be experienced by J. McGrath in his native Northern Wales through the regular revivals of Christmas pantos. The troupe who had supported the Spanish Republic, staging *The Sheepwell*, a translation of Lope de Vega's 17th century play *Fuente Ovejuna*, then contributed to anti-Nazi fight, staging their own translation of Piscator's adaptation of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweig* in Manchester in 1939 with songs. The company consequently soon changed its name for Theatre Workshop in 1945, through the experience of war and antifascist cultural fight, with more musical shows, like McColl's *Paradise Show* in 1953 or adapting a wide range of writers from Aristophanes to Hugh McDiarmaid through O'Casey or Chekhov. With J. Littlewood, the company was run on an egalitarian cooperative mode. After touring the North of England in Social clubs for eight years, it also visited Germany and Czechoslovakia or Northern countries in Europe before settling down in the early 1950s in the East End of London at Stratford-atte-Bowe, to design a drama on the lives and cares of the local working-class community. Yet theatre going audiences moved in from London too. As Nicole Boireau explains:

Pour Joan Littlewood, le théâtre est l'âme du peuple. Socialiste, plutôt anarchisante, elle se revendique 'rouge'. Le travail de Theatre Workshop se fonde sur une recherche collective dans un esprit égalitaire. Le metteur en scène doit perdre son statut

de démiurge tout puissant pour se fondre dans l'ensemble.
(Boireau 1983)

The original playwrights were invited to contribute to the construction of the shows. Such productions among so many contemporary classics as Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* or Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* anticipated J. Littlewood's personal and collective later famous *Oh What a Lovely War*. All these productions are aesthetically characterised by the introduction of music, songs and pantomime. The Pierrot-like specificity of *Oh What a Lovely War*, with so much musical parodied nationalist First-World-War singing, rather than a direct Italian borrowing, refers to the popular tradition of a caustic Pierrot in the famous Stand-up comedy tradition, particularly with Lancashire She-comedians, which had toured British seaside resorts since the 1920s. The juxtaposition of projections, jokes, facts and songs, and the way they interrupt each other constructed a dialectical collision montage (after Eisenstein's definition), resulting in shared emotion with the audiences. *Oh What a Lovely War* performed not only an alternative version of the First World War, but an alternative model of social and theatrical reality inheriting the working class favorite form of a good night out still famous in the 1950s in variety shows and social clubs in the North of England. The Clarion Singers and Dramatic Clubs from Manchester or the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) or People's Players in London had already designed it in the 1920s⁴.

Foreign influences also marked both Littlewood and McGrath. Walter Benjamin of course, and, earlier, the Austrian *Volkstück*, which, according to Michel Cadot appeared in Vienna early in the nineteenth century. It includes music and dancing in a true theatrical frame mediated by the potential artistic qualities of the company. Besides, many plays offer epic separate scenes with a prologue, songs, a court-room session, play within the play forms, with an epilogue. Hungarian playwright Horvath then used these forms as a distancing critical tool to analyse social interaction against rising Hitlerism. M. Cadot confronts them with Bertolt Brecht's plays from *Puntilla* onwards (Cadot, 34). Brecht was known in Britain as early as the 1920s. A production of *The Three Penny Opera* was presented in September 1928 in *The Times* as a contemporary rebel homage to John Gay after the 200th celebration of his *The*

Beggar's Opera. Brecht's influence was central and was discussed the very first night J. Littlewood and Ewan MacColl met in London.

As for J. McGrath, referring to Brecht's new aesthetic principles, he notes that:

Pedagogics. This was in 1929./.../And so we are talking about Brecht at a time when his involvement with the Berlin workers was most urgent. But pedagogics is what he was offering them. /.../ Pedagogics, after all is the art of passing down information and judgements./.../Distance, in place of solidarity./.../ Now, it is not surprising that Brecht and Piscator showed such hostility to their audiences, as 98 % of the time they were the hated bourgeoisie, in Berlin's West End. (1981-b, p.38-40)

before adding, about Brecht and Piscator's contributions: "However the achievements of Brecht and Piscator in the area of political theatre on the side of the working-class is beyond question."⁵

With these references in mind, the perpetuation of popular forms in British theatre invites to examine J. McGrath's aim to build a theory of the use and function of music and songs in plays. His Liverpoolian experience with *Trees in the Wind* (August 1971), then his Scottish involvement with *The Cheviot* allowed him to insert referential extra-diegetic songs with intertextual echoes to each play text. They usually borrowed existing melodies with a double contradictory function. Essential to focalize intertextual musical pieces, they also offer an iterative echo to the necessary elements of the dialogue with a parodic or comic flavour. Often lent to adverse characters, they underline their negative influence on the development of the narrative. They can easily be assimilated to epic distancing by experienced audiences, and as a direct caricature denouncing injustice by popular ones. Yet, structurally, diegetic or not, songs have a further function. They assess under the direct control of the specifically targeted audiences the universal artistic value of their popular culture, beyond mere entertainment. The choice of the pieces was often made with the musicians. Their intimate knowledge of the local cultural background increases the adequate illustrative or iterative, or contrapunctual relevance of the lyrics to the dialogues in the play. Accordingly, such music can be light urban pop light songs, national historic referential ones, protest song, or popular famous poets' songs, like Mary Mc Pherson's from Skye, in *The Cheviot*, or in J.

McGrath' play for 7:84 in the autumn of 1987, *Mairi Mhor, the Woman from Skye*, which retraces the epic story of the local heroine and bard who, unfairly imprisoned for her active contribution to the fight against the Clearances in the Highlands, wrote many epic poems and songs in the Isle of Skye at the end of the 19th century.

J. McGrath's contribution will best be compared to the introduction in dramatic pieces of a popular song repertoire from the French revolution to the present days, through the successive working-class revolt movements, from the Canuts in Lyon or the Paris Commune. From the same period to the 1950s, the history of working-class melodramatic or parodic song cabarets in Saint-Etienne confirms the playwright's conviction of the necessary intimate association of extra and intradiegetic songs in theatrical performance to acknowledge national or social cultural identities. In an intemporal interplay between past and present, the music connives with the audience's own culture and knowledge in a friendly way, through the mediation of the performers and playwright. The emotion suggested by music and song validates the discourse of the show and allows relative distancing with the objective or fictional facts narrated. J. McGrath expertly modifies the cultural referent of a well-known song, transposes its rhythms and tones into another culture. In *the Cheviot* for instance, *These are My Mountains* was first claimed by the crofters, then by Queen Victoria over them, and lastly parodically allowed to the Texan Petrol financier sent to rule over Scottish oil fields. Such proceedings are easily deciphered by audiences. Extra diegetic songs are often kept in their genuine social or regional languages.

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (31 March 1973, Edinburgh, toured until June 1974, broadcasted on BBC 1 : 6 June 1974 and 17 May 1975), then *The Game's a Bogey* (tour beginning in January 1974 in Aberdeen), and lastly *Joe's Drum* (21 May 1979, Aberdeen, then toured) can be held as landmarks in the playwright's Scottish career. The artistic distancing of national dramatic events and popular heroes largely contributed to the rising conscience of a national identity in Scotland claiming for autonomy. Actualized and performed in 1991, at the Glasgow Mayfest festival, then, in August at the Edinburgh Festival under a circus tent on the Meadows, by Wildcat, *The Cheviot* revived its

popular original success. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, in times of drastic cut in subsidies, *Joe's Drum* drew a parallel between Joe Smith and other charismatic leaders fighting for Scottish identity in previous centuries with contemporary preoccupations. Such a succession of narratives and heroes could be boring without the use of burlesque and music or songs. The show opens with J. Smith and his drum as a narrator. A rich locally rooted dialect – except when English characters speak – adds to the melody of sounds, in a fast spoken performance. Diegetic choirs, miming, ballet-like, industrial or rebel action accompany contrapuntal genuine historical lyrics and musical pieces. The show largely confirms J. McGrath's principle that universal reception is compatible with specifically rooted narration. If the tales of Joe's adventures along with Tom Muir, James Connely or Robert Hamilton's can hardly be deciphered by foreign spectators, they, yet, perceive their role in the spectacularity of a collective machinist performance underlined and confirmed by its musical continuity and the musicality of the language and humour, stressed by the reaction of local popular informed audiences. As Terry Eagleton indicates, aesthetic criterions in literature, and further in theatre performance are grounded in an exchange value established between the author, actors, designers and all, with the audience. A text is inevitably a tool for chosen – explicit or not – ideology, which is decoded through conventions by the reader or spectator at a historically given time (Eagleton, 167).

After resigning from 7:84 under Scottish Arts Council pressure, J. McGrath wrote and directed two more significant festive carnival promenade shows in the Tramshed, a former garage in the popular district of the Gorbals in Glasgow with the help of the local authorities. He added moving acting on wagons with a mobile audience following and involved in mass action. *There is a Happy Land* (1976) with 7:84, already anticipated that aesthetic evolution. *Border Warfare* (1989) centers on the historic relations between Scotland and England and the conflicts on the Borders. *John Brown's Body* (1990), earlier sketched out in *Joe's Drum* (1979), traces the social memory of the revolutionary working-class in Scotland since the 18th century. Machinist constructivist structures, ballet-like collective movements are performed by WildCat, the former musical group for 7:84. Music and singing are constant. J. McGrath cites Ariane Mnouchkine, his

former assistant in Oxford, Ronconi, or Circus Oz from Australia as comparable artistic experiences, or, again, Jérôme Savary at the time of his Grand Magic Circus⁶. Royal de Luxe, often invited to the Edinburgh festival could also be added to that panel. Then, due to further cuts in subsidies, J. McGrath wrote three one-woman epics among which, *Watching for Dolphins* (London November 1991, Saint-Étienne CDN⁷, March 1992). That musical piece stages a single actress who plays the piano and accompanies the songs she delivers as aesthetic formulations of her memories and traumas. One of the marking games played in *Watching for Dolphins* is a game with the audience about how a story should be told and echo to their experience:

It starts of as a kind of frothy comedy about a woman who can't get it together in the cooking division. Then she asks how would the postmodernists do it, and, as she creates this film noir with an American film director, Liz plays all the women in a documentary about her life (McGrath 2002, 201).

That ideological introspection in times of growing individualism under conservative rule favours the character's hope for a new humanist mood perceived through the parable of the dolphins. In her monologue, the individual example means to partake of our common history as the intertextual contribution of music and song ethically and emotionally interferes with our experience of social or artistic life in the same period in Europe. The play scans the far side of the popular forms the playwright favours. Baz Kershaw (1992) clearly situates the state of fragmentation and uncertainty of societies, particularly in Britain, in the 1990's:

November 9, 1989, was a major watershed in post-war world history. Around the globe millions watched their television screens to see the Berlin Wall at last begin to come down./.../(It) signaled the start of an all-pervasive transformation of the world order./.../Maybe it [Brecht's ghost] was hanging back, puffing on a ruminative cigar, wondering what kind of protest the new political order might demand./.../Despite the good news, in Britain, ten years of Thatcherism seemed to have created a chronically unstable socio-political order (Kershaw, 206-7).

J. McGrath wished to contribute aesthetically to a reflection on progressive humanist hopes so as to weigh positively on their survival. The audiences share his views especially when including members of the

1968 generations. Music acts in the telling as a reflection rather than an interval, as the character illustrates and humorously stresses her emotions, doubts and beliefs. 'Where have all the garlies gone', she sings, while savagely carving into the leg of lamb she's about to roast. The audiences remember the antinuclear peace movements of the 1970's. She also alternates piano playing and asides when evoking Mikis Theodorakis, a model of rectitude and faithfulness whose now imprisoned, now free life, remained true to beliefs presently considered as obsolete or even criminal :

And gallant little England was fighting wicked Adolf Hitler./.../And when I was five, we won the war, and we danced in the streets/.../ and Mikis Theodorakis, the young Greek composer, got out of the Nazi prison.

(she plays Theodorakis piece)

By the time I was ten, they were bad, these communists/.../, but my father who had fought all his life for Freedom for the Colonies said at least the Reds believed in the self-determination of nations, so I joined the Young Communists. But, when I was 16, the Hungarians were a bit over-determined and the Russians invaded them and said who the government should be, and father sadly had to admit that all that was precisely what he'd been fighting against all his life. He found he had a lot more free evenings, and I took up tennis.

And Theodorakis was a Communist so he was put back in prison by the Greeks - But he didn't give up.....

(plays more Theodorakis : Z theme.)⁸.

The biting humour for the over determination of Hungary, or the bitter one about the new leisure of activists is bitter enough. A coded dramatisation of the tragedy of History, to which the character, the audience, the actress and the playwright are confronted, is at work. This double game relies on the metaphoric in the intertextual illustrations, of which the music pieces are the richest examples. The playwright discreetly stresses the constant shift from epic to post-modern forms through metatheatrical musical signs. When, bored with ironing, Reynalda plays a disturbing Bartok piece and says "Poor Bartok! Fancy being a Hungarian in 1939?" (WfD, 7), the parallelism is significant. As he questions our recent past, J. McGrath suddenly revives a recurrent theme in British political plays.

However, M. Theodorakis's counter example confirms J. McGrath's positive views on communism, especially when including a denunciation of arbitrariness. The wording is stressed by the piece the actress plays: it illustrates her thinking with its diegetic suggestion. When hearing the extract from *Z* audiences don't need any comment. It illustrates the connotative richness of J. McGrath's play. The strength of its message is an attempt at catharsis, in the Aristotelian sense. If a purification for the audience through a performance, it is one for the playwright too. Yet, the effect that is sought overlaps empathy. The intertext with M. Theodorakis will occur again both as a musical metaphor and an explicit reference in the monologue. Associated with the dolphin parable, it allows an optimistic reading of the play, even though the character says:

Socialism. And the very word socialism has become a foul word, anathema, another scar on history, like Nazism and the holocaust. We have become in the eyes of the world, the very horror that we had set out to drive off the face of the earth. /.../ And whether it is true or a brilliant archipelago of lies, we are defeated by it. For the moment. And it is best to admit it (WfD, 19).

Beyond Reynalda's, the words are obviously E. MacLennan's own. Her existential doubting confers the character with a fragility audiences can approve of, as they currently watch plays in which psychological disarray replaces the sharing of social popular realities.

Beyond a complex use of stereotypes, J. McGrath turns to a critical integration of prevailing postmodern cultural proceedings. The active intertextual inclusion of such songs as Joan Baez's *Where have all the Flowers Gone*, or *Bandiera Rosa*, or *The Internationale*, and *When Spring Smiles*, *Le Temps des cerises*, induces a revolutionary culture to be acknowledged if not shared by the audience whereas the pieces of music borrowed from Mozart, Beethoven, Bartok, Scott Joplin, Theodorakis or Shostakovitch function as direct metaphoric stresses, emphasizing or generating further reflections. Both kinds of illustrative pieces contribute to establish Reynalda as a non typical hostess. Cultivated and a good musician, she obviously echoes the actress's own cultural identity. E. MacLennan contributed to the choice of the works she wanted to play, and thus influenced the development of the narrative confidence⁹.

The minute exemplification offered by *Watching for Dolphins* represents an ultimate completion of J. McGrath's constant use of songs and music in his plays and promenade show throughout his career, from Liverpool to Scotland until he died. The thematic contents and their aesthetic expression merge to meet both the playwright's own style and the collective writing of British alternative theatre. Roland Barthes's terminology is purposely being used here, as he defines the collective style of a literary trend with the word 'writing'. With all its complex variety and aesthetic or ideological specificities, the alternative trend can be assimilated to a vast school, or theatrical movement at least. The word 'style' rather points out the specific ways of each writer and digs into their intimate mythologies. J. McGrath precisely meets both standards while he also definitely belongs to the narrow group of major contemporary British playwrights. His choice to privilege popular audiences led to this extremely personal and universal, as well as strikingly powerful, play. His theorized knowledge of popular aesthetic forms articulated on humour, stereotype and music or song plainly justifies his argument in Saint-Etienne:

Must we merely follow the tastes of mass audiences, modified through television? We would waste our and their time. We must elaborate a strategy using the popular forms to do something./.../You have to be critical to your audience. Not simply populist, but to make it analyse what its own standards are. Make it analyse its strengths and weaknesses.¹⁰

His creative contribution to political musical theatre along with his theoretical views, which were further¹¹ theorized in his last volume of reflections at the end of his life (McGrath, 2002) offer a rich dialectic contrast with the aims of contemporary private commercial dominant musical theatre which is largely analysed in the present issue of *Coup de Theatre* and offers an alternative to militant creativity:

So let's look at the values of this commercial theatre, which dominates now as in the 1950s. The huge successes, the multimillion pound Really Useful businesses, are the musicals of one, Andrew Lloyd Webber, or imitations of them. Their storylines are slender, and either whimsical or mildly melodramatic. They are packed every night with citizens seeking not recognisable relevant *hubris* but a fawning escape from reality. We

must pause and ask why these musical escapades are the most triumphant pieces of theatre in the 1990s? Why their titillating sexism, their bland 'moralisms', their refusal to question anything, fit so well with the ideology of our so-called socialist society? (2002, 238)

Like his multicharacter epics or promenade shows, *Watching for Dolphins* offers a striking contrast to the musical forms J. McGrath denounces so vehemently. Socially and politically concerned with its audiences, loaded with so much personal implication that ultimate production reflects J. McGrath's art of writing at its best thus echoing his early plays, while inheriting the manners carved out of his vast and deeply rooted social experience with popular writing. His unabashed popular success with audiences is visible in the films of the performances whether in Glasgow or in remote Highland villages, produced and broadcasted by BBC Scotland, then by his own Freeway Film company. They show hilarious people singing along not only the extradiegetic Gaelic or Scots songs they historically own, but also the parodied protest ones, confirming his intuition of a dialectic exchange between artists and audiences relying on shared cultural social experience. The final examination of *Watching for Dolphins* allows one to survey the laying of multiple forms of performance within an intimist monologue which is as efficient as it regularly was in former collective productions. A key multireferential framework is created to allow popular audiences to share the queries of the playwright both with compassion and reflection. The playwright's introspection is carefully mediated by a female mouthpiece who contributes to acknowledge the strong survival of a critical drama, when it keeps asserting the importance of history and collective memory as key components of today's cultural knowledge, however loaded with complexity and uncertainties it may be. Music and song, particularly popular ones, are key tools in this ethical and aesthetic mediation.

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NOTES :

- 1 McGrath J, "The Process of Finding a Form, interviews by Itzin Catherine, Trussler Simon (1981, 98-109), p.108.
- 2 cited by Elizabeth MacLENNAN (1990, p.70).
- ³ I shall not quote from that play in this article as Ian Brown's analysis is rich with quotes in section three of the present issue (p.165...), and particularly about the three interpretations of *These are my Mountains*. His article neatly reveals the connections between political drama and songs. His suggested bibliography opportunely enlarges my own. You may also read the many articles I have devoted along my career to J.McGrath's criticism and particularly to *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, of which this paper is a synopsis.
- 4 for a rich examination of Littlewood's contribution and heritage, see Leach, (2006).
- 5 McGrath, 1981-b chapter 3, "Mediating Contemporary Reality", p.43.
- 6 McGrath J, 1993, "Celebration, Spectacle, Carnival", ch. 6, p.145-66.
- ⁷ Centre Dramatique National : the first National Dramatic Centre created outside Paris in 1946, with Jean Dasté, still one of the major French National Theatres.
- 8 *Watching for Dolphins*, unpublished, personal script offered by J. McGrath, from now on abridged : WfD. Quotation p.13.
- 9 This analysis of *Watching for Dolphins*, now centered on the part music plays in the show is revised from a former personal contribution to Nicole Boireau's book (1997): "Watching for Dolphins by John McGrath : the Single Voicing of a Multiple Voice Performance", , chapter 11, p.171-183)
- 10 A conference delivered by John McGrath on 16 April 1991 at Jean Monnet University, after I had translated and staged a bilingual production of *The Cheviot* in Saint-Etienne in which he had particularly liked the choice of students of North-African origin to play the parts of Scottish crofters, using Gaelic language, as a assertive tribute to the cultural universal quality of rooted localism.
- 11 This ultimate contribution echoes his previous theoretical reflections, particularly with his two sets of conferences at Cambridge University (McGrath 1981 and 1993)