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2016 Conference Proceedings

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/182756v1>

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Publication Date

2018-01-08

Peer reviewed



Acting as Participatory Sense-Making

Proceedings of A Body of Knowledge - Embodied Cognition and the Arts conference
CTSA UCI 8-10 Dec 2016

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To begin with, a few words on my background. I am a researcher at a Swedish theatre school, Malmö Theatre academy, Lund University, where I have also long been active as a teacher. The school offers a three-year program for acting, among other programs. After their graduation our acting students find their ways into theatre institutions around the country, experimental theatres, performance collectives, as well as into film and television. They become confronted with the extremely variegated and complex challenges offered to actors by theatre and media today.

In theatre literature acting methodology is often described as a struggle of approaches, or schools, or styles. Experience from my acting academy does not support this view. Rather, handled with competence and consideration, different traditions in acting can complement each other by highlighting and developing different aspects of the actor's art, and habitual focus on differences easily conceals important similarities.¹

In this talk, I am going to address an element that is present in many forms of acting, the element of *subjunctivity*, i.e. when the actor, implicitly or explicitly, applies a working mode regulated by questions like "what if I were in the role's situation?".

Participatory sense-making

I am going to discuss this in relation to an enactive theory about interaction, that of "participatory sense-making", which has been developed by Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel di Paolo, philosopher and cognitive scientist, University of the Basque Country, and Professor at the Basque Foundation for Science, respectively. In this theory they set out to explain processes of meaning making in social interaction. Acting builds on similar mechanisms for meaning making as we find in social life. Not only does the interpretation of a role reflect

forms of human interaction in a fictive mode. Acting is also an art form that builds on here-and-now human interaction, in the first hand on that between the actor and his/her fellow actors.

De Jaegher and Di Paolo introduced their theory of participatory sense-making in an article entitled “Participatory sense-making: An enactive approach to social cognition”, which they published in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* in 2007. In the article, as well as in other writings, they describe participatory sense-making as a theory about social interaction. Examples of this are “the face-to-face encounters of everyday”, which can range from ordinary conversations to couple dance. De Jaegher and Di Paolo explain the concept of participatory sense-making in the following way:

meaning is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction process and the individuals engaged in it

sense-making becomes participatory sense-making

the interaction process can take on a form of autonomy

the onus of social understanding thus moves away from strictly the individual only. (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007, p. 485)

All this attention to the autonomy of the interaction should not make us forget the important and indispensable role individuals play in interaction. (De Jaegher, Froese 2009, p. 453)

This lifeworld interplay of interactions in enlanguaged environments // . . . // is the condition of meaning-*making*. (Cuffari, E.C., Di Paolo, E., De Jaegher, H. 2015)

A conversation

In her talks, Hanne De Jaegher sometimes uses sequences from Hollywood films to illustrate her points. I am going to follow her example here. I am going to apply the above quotes from De Jaegher and Di Paolo to a conversation that takes place in the opening scene of Coppola's *The Godfather* from 1972. I deliberately chose a sequence from the perhaps most well-known film there is, so that I won't have to spend too much time on explaining the plot to you.

Suffice it to recall that in the sequence an American businessman of Italian descent, Amerigo Bonasera, approaches a mafia boss, Don Vito Corleone, to seek vengeance on two men who have inflicted violence on Bonasera's daughter and then escaped legal justice. Let's take a look at a short clip from the conversation that unfolds itself.

(Clip from the opening scene of the film):

Bonasera (*whispers in Corleone's ear*): I want them dead.

Corleone: That I cannot do

Bonasera: I'll give you anything you ask

What we see in this sequence is a face-to-face encounter, a conversation. It takes place in an environment with certain characteristics: a stately office, with blinded windows, and in the presence of two other persons. The social roles of the main persons are articulated in the scene: the mafia boss, the businessman. Corleone, in evening dress, has a rose on the spread of his jacket, which signals his daughter's wedding party that is about to take place in the space outside the office, and this event in turn has importance for the encounter between him

and Bonasera, because on the wedding day of his daughter a *don* cannot refuse a favour. The persons in the scene are situated in these kinds of circumstances, which could illustrate the "situatedness and embodiment of the social subject", in De Jaegher's and Di Paolo's wording (2007).

The persons are autonomous agents, each with his characteristic traits, but their conversation also takes on a form of autonomy in the sense that no one of the interlocutors can separately determine, or anticipate, its outcome (a slide is shown from the end of the sequence representing Bonasera kissing Corleone's hand). "The interaction process gains a life of its own", to use the words of Hanne De Jaegher and Thomas Fuchs. And: "Now since in normal interaction none of the participants is able to completely steer the process deliberately but is drawn into the feedback and feed-forward cycles of the interaction, the process itself can become leading over the two interactors." (De Jaegher, Fuchs 2009, p. 471, See also De Jaegher, Di Paolo, Gallagher 2010, p. 442.)

Thus, to sum up, in the conversation between Bonasera and Corleone

- meaning is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction process and the individuals engaged in it
- sense-making becomes participatory sense-making
- the interaction process takes on a form of autonomy
- the onus of social understanding thus moves away from strictly the individual only.

- all this attention to the autonomy of the interaction does not make us forget the important and indispensable role individuals play in interaction
- this lifeworld interplay of interactions in enlanguaged environments // . . . // is the condition of meaning-*making*.

Acting as a way to research human world interaction

On the other hand, what we see in the clip is of course not a conversation between the persons Bonasera and Corleone, but the actors Salvatore Corsitto and Marlon Brando involved in another activity, that of acting.

Nonetheless the actors share an environmental setting corresponding to the one accorded to the conversation. This setting is only an imaginative construct. Still, importantly, the elements of this environment constrain the actors' actions in minute detail. I will shortly recall some of them.

Corleone's office

The social roles of the dramatic figures

The presence of the two other men

The wedding party with its significance for the encounter

Previous contacts between Corleone and Bonasera

The actors act in relation to these imagined circumstance, which they make sense of in interaction. What I refer to as imagined or hypothetical circumstances is the *subjunctive* element.

The actors in this sequence act as if they found themselves in the situation of this conversation, and this is also how I as a spectator make sense of their actions.

Subjunctivity comes with situatedness, an imaginative situatedness that is nevertheless compelling.

This interplay between actors and assumed, or hypothetical situations easily goes under the radar of our attention as trivial. Habitually acting is often described in terms of the individual actor's interpretation of another, fictional individual, the character.

One of those who foregrounded the situated aspect of acting was the Russian actor, director and writer on the actor's art, Konstantin Stanislavsky. The idea of subjunctivity/situatedness is a central, and yet relatively unexplored, side of his work.

Subjunctivity, and hypothetical situatedness, or the actor's interaction with an environment, does not have to be realist, or even fictitious. Thus, on this point, Stanislavsky transcends the boundaries of realism, the aesthetics he himself applied his writings to.²

Stanislavsky's "if"

A great problem for Stanislavsky at the beginning of his career was the fact that the actor's work seemed to be inseparable from deception and fake, that as an actor he was to appear as someone he was not (Stanislavsky 1926, 2008, p. 255 f.). Stanislavsky's way out of this dilemma became what he called the "magic", or "creative" if. This is how he formulated this approach.

If there were such and such relations among the characters, if their particular habits were such and such, if they lived in such a setting and so on, how would the

actor react if he were placed in these circumstances? (Stanislavsky 1938, 1953, 2008 , p. 50)

The *if* was a solution to the problem of deception in the sense that to put oneself in someone else's situation does not presuppose that one pretends to be this person. The departing point is the actor's own first person perspective.

The circumstances Stanislavsky talks about are what he came to name "the given circumstances", and which he defined in the following way:

They /the given circumstances/ mean the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of the action, the way of life, how we as actors and directors understand the play, the contributions we ourselves make, the *mise-en-scène*, etc, everything which is given for the actors as they rehearse. (Stanislavsky 1938, 1953, 2008, p. 52-53)

Note that the definition takes up both those circumstances that are fictitious, and those that are not. Acting may produce fiction, but doing this is a pursuit in the real world.

Stanislavsky recommended his actors to engage in an extended period of preparation, in order to get to know the circumstances of the play, to make sense of them, or to "justify" them, in Stanislavsky's own words.

The scope of this talk does not permit me to go much in detail about this work but here are some of the steps he mentions:

1. Close reading of the dramatic text.

2. Analysis with the aim to uncover circumstances given in the dramatic text, and to justify them in a first person understanding.

3. Analysis “at the table” together with the director and the rest of the cast: the ensemble strives towards a shared understanding of the text (“Woe from Wit 1916-20”, Stanislavsky 1957, 2010, Benedetti 1982 p. 63-65).

Whether the quest for the given circumstances be the individual actor’s concern or that of the entire ensemble, in this form it is, in the first hand, a mental form of analysis aimed at uncovering possible motives and intentions behind the roles’ actions. Later Stanislavsky found this approach unsatisfactory, because it did not, in his view, sufficiently involve the actor’s body.

Towards the end of his life he came up with a solution to this problem in the form of what was to be named “the analysis on the floor”. This idea was further developed by his long-time assistant and follower as a teacher at the Moscow Theatre Academy, Maria Knebel, in her book *Action Analysis*.³

In the “analysis on the floor” the actors improvise over the given circumstances in sequences of the play. (Toporkov 165 f, Stanislavsky 1957, 2010, p. 88, Knebel 1959, 2006). The understanding of the role/other becomes embodied, interactive, and participatory, and it is nourished by the autonomous element engendered by the embodied encounters on the rehearsal floor.

The upshot is that Stanislavsky went from the idea of acting as representing an *other* (a character) to the idea that as an actor he *enacts* a human being on the basis of the role’s “given circumstances” from his own first person perspective. The role is emergent from the actor’s embodied interaction with the circumstances.

In order to achieve this, the basic prerequisites are:

- situatedness
- intention
- embodiment
- interaction⁴

Situatedness and acting in alternative performative forms

In her book *The Director's Craft*, Katie Mitchell, prominent contemporary director and performance artist, utters this:

You can use Stanislavsky's techniques regardless of the style or genre of play or project you are working on. I have used them when working on Greek plays like *Iphigenia in Aulis*, new plays like Kevin Elyot's *Forty Winks*, abstract plays such as Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* or Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls*, and even operas. (Mitchell p. 227)

Arguably the universality Mitchell ascribes to Stanislavsky's techniques is not just the product of one man's achievement, but is due to the fact that the bodily subjunctivity, which Stanislavsky singled out and researched in his practice appears in different forms of theatre and acting.

Acting generally takes place in respect of given, or assumed, circumstances. As we saw, it made sense to describe Corsitto's and Brando's work in the *Godfather* sequence in this way, irrespective of whether or not the actors did actually talk about their work in these terms.

Bodily subjunctivity is a distinct form of activity, a practice that is solidly anchored in the history of acting. The conceptualization of it as such is secondary, and it is not necessarily a prerequisite for its application in the practice.

Situations, or given circumstances, do not have to be fictive. It is possible to arrange situations by using constraints inherent in a factual situation. I here show a picture from a performance, *Super Night Shot*, by the Anglo-German performance collective Gob Squad who specializes in site-specificity and regulated improvisations. Arguably there remains grounding similarities between their conceptual situatedness and fictional situatedness as described by e.g. Stanislavsky. I will illustrate this with some quotes from *Gob Squad Reader*, a book the collective has given out on their work (Freiburg et al. 2010).

Gob Squad

“The core idea is often a constructed social situation, site specific or a relationship between public and performers.” (Gob squad reader, p. 20)

“The actions in the artificial context are real.” (Ibid, p. 32)

“I am a rabbit or a hero, but in essence I am myself.” (Ibid, p. 51)

Stanislavsky

A social situation constructed by fictive means in the form of a mostly realist dramatic text

The actions in the artificial, fictitious, context are real. (The actor uses his/her own first person as point of departure for his/her scenic actions)

The actor always remains himself (cf. above, by the same token).

To sum up:

Acting is an advanced hands-on way to investigate how sense-making takes place in human interaction, and it makes use of the entire gamut of human embodied expressive means and their combinations, in relation to possible constraints.

The theory of participatory sense making is consistent with the situated and interactive vision of human interaction that is extensively also grounding in the actor's working process, as well as in hugely influential acting methodology.

In the first hand, the investigative element in acting has a pragmatic aim within the performative art form. But results of this kind of investigations are also amenable to empirical research on conditions for human interaction.

Endnotes

1. In his/her professional life an actor today is likely to be presented with a multitude of different tasks, due to the extremely variegated material (s)he meets in modern theatre, film and performance. In my professional activities at a theatre academy I have had opportunities to observe on close range and for extended time the working methods of visiting teachers representing a great span of different approaches to acting: according to the Stanislavskyan tradition (Martin Kurtén, Theatre Academy Helsinki, Natalia Zvereva, GITIS, Moscow), Brechtian acting (Elisabeth Zillmer, Theaterhochschule Ernst Busch, East Berlin), theatricality and clown technique (Mario Gonzalez, Conservatoire, Paris, earlier Théâtre du Soleil), to mention some of them, and I cannot recall any form of conflict between these idioms. The one responsible for accommodating them to each other within the frame of a unifying educational idea was, during fourteen of the years I spent at the academy, Radu Penciulescu, a Rumanian director and, before his exile, professor of directing at the Caragiale academy of acting, Bucharest, where he became famous for training a new generation of important directors. One of them, Andrei Serban, later acknowledged that Penciulescu taught him in embryonic form what he later came to learn with Peter Brook (Cazaban 1999, p. 104). Penciulescu, now retired, has left few texts behind apart from notes taken by others at different appearances he made in France, such as those of his talk and workshop at the international Stanislavsky conference, *Le Siècle Stanislavski*, at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 1988, and of a talk he gave in connection with the event *Les penseurs de l'enseignement* arranged by professor Georges Banu, Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle Paris 3, in 2000. On the other hand, there were features in Penciulescu's teaching that correspond to elements that permeate Stanislavsky's writings on the actor's art from his first conception of his "system" until his final years. Thus Penciulescu likewise made great

emphasis on the importance of the *situation* for the actor's work, as described elsewhere in this article, which corresponds to Stanislavsky's emphasis on the "if" and "given circumstances". Penciulescu also made frequent use of what in Stanislavsky goes under the name of "the analysis on the floor", and in Knebel of "action analysis".

Thus, when referring to Stanislavsky in this paper I indirectly also refer to a practice with which I have developed long and deep acquaintance.

In recent years I have been involved in an artistic research project together with a Swedish theatre and performance collective specializing in multimodal forms, Teatr Weimar. The project, named "Anatomy of the Moment", was sponsored by the Swedish Research Council, and aimed at investigating the element of situatedness in connection with multimodality in theatre. Experiences from this work coincide with observations of the work of Gob Squad accounted for elsewhere in this paper.

2. When mentioning the name "Stanislavsky" one runs the risk that the listener associates it with first of all two ideas. One is "identification with the character", the other "emotion memory". As for the idea of "identification with the character" one will have a hard time even finding this formulation in Stanislavsky's written work. Instead, as pointed out elsewhere in this paper, the idea was that the actor should imaginatively enter the role's *situation*, which is the meaning of what Stanislavsky calls the "if" and "the given circumstances", formulations that, in contrast, recur innumerable times in his written work.

"Emotion memory", as pointed out by Merlin among others, is a term Lee Strasberg found in Stanislavsky's writings and which he gave an importance for his own "Method acting" that lacks correspondence in Stanislavsky's teaching. Stanislavsky, who was struck by the power past-tense memory has on present-tense experience found the term in a work by the French psychologist Théodule Ribot and he gave emotion memory the function of an actor's 'store-

room' of past experience that inevitably becomes activated in the work on a role. But Stanislavsky did not recommend the actors to actively delve into past emotional experiences in order to find expressions for their parts (Merlin 2010 142-144).

Lee Strasberg was inspired by Stanislavsky's writing, and this made many identify his teaching with Stanislavsky's. Stanislavsky has also inspired other great names within American actors training, who each have set his/her own imprint on this heritage. The drawback has been confusing lack of consensus as to whom or what one was actually referring when talking about "Stanislavsky".

Besides appropriations of Stanislavsky's teaching by others, the reception of his works in English speaking countries has been marked by the fact that it was presented with distorting omissions in translations that have been called into question on various grounds.

Such problems have not existed to the same extent in countries, including my own, where no one with the prestige and influence of a Lee Strasberg has been able to stand in the way of the original. Satisfactory translations have also been available in some languages, including Swedish.

A remedy to problems caused by available English versions of Stanislavsky's major works has come in the form of recent new translations by the hand of Jean Benedetti, who long has made himself a name as a prominent Stanislavsky scholar. Out of the growing secondary literature devoted to Stanislavsky's own acting methodology and teaching one can mention works by Sharon M Carnicke, Bella Merlin and Rhonda Blair, who also with her book *The Actor, Image, and Action* pioneered the cognitive approach to Stanislavsky's work.

3. As yet Knebel's book has not appeared in English translation.

4. Stanislavsky's description in the essay "Woe from Wit" (Stanislavsky 1957, 2010) of the actor's work to find out and evaluate the "given circumstances" could be seen as a way to find out, or reconstruct, the role's "world", or "life world" in the sense given to this notion in the phenomenological tradition from Edmund Husserl. There is a growing interest in commonalities between elements in Stanislavsky's teaching and grounding elements in phenomenological thought (Fortier 1997, Leach 2004, Johnston 2011).

4. The "analysis on the floor" is a form of improvisation, and, as Lutterbie points out, "over the last half century, improvisation has become a standard tool in most rehearsal spaces" (Lutterbie 2011, p. 162). In this book, Lutterbie approaches the use of improvisation in acting from the point of view of Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of "lines of flight" (Deleuze, Guattari 1987), and the theory of conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Lutterbie also addresses the use of improvisation as applied by some important names within modern theatre, such as Grotowski, Barba, Mnouchkine and Boal. Lutterbie describes how improvisation can be used to "explore a situation in a different context" in order to attain "understanding and novel insights" (pp.173, 175), but he does not specifically address Stanislavsky's "analysis on the floor".

In connection with his workshop at the Stanislavsky conference at Centre Georges Pompidou in 1988 Penciulescu underlines the purely practical use he makes of improvisation. In his view improvisation has no value in itself, but only as a means to highlight, and focus on, specific details in the practical work on a play: "The improvisation has no value in itself: rather than

being an investigation into its own success it's a gate for the understanding of something else that is going to be used in the work" (Penciulescu 1989, p. 144).

In this regard his practice is similar to Maria Knebel's "analysis on the floor", or, as she also names it the "method of analysis through action" (Knebel 1959, 2006, p. 39.) While the idea of the "analysis on the floor" seems still to be under development even in the late

Stanislavsky stagings Toporkov documented in his book, in Knebel we learn about this tool as already tested out and accorded a clearly defined use within the staging process, something she gives a more concise description of than we can find in any of Stanislavsky's own works. But frequent references Knebel makes to Stanislavsky underline that she only continued a practice she had become acquainted with as his assistant. At the centre of this practice stands Stanislavsky's conviction of the 'complete unity' between 'the life of the human body' and 'the life of the human spirit' (Ibid., p. 46).

In Knebel's account the "analysis on the floor" does not replace the "analysis at the table".

Rather, the process follows a dialectical course: the actors engage in the "analysis at the table" and, when so needed, they go out on the floor and apply the analysis through action to parts of the scene, only afterwards to return to the table again (Ibid. p. 74-85).

If the work on the role takes on the character of a process of understanding how human actions make sense in relation to hypothetical situatedness, and the actors in this way engage in a form of intersubjective understanding, this working mode, interestingly, does not draw any dividing line between understanding of others in terms of physical behaviour, and in terms of "intellectual understanding" of intentions and motives, respectively, but rather builds on close interplay between these two modes.

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