



The Moving Parts: Screen Acting and Empathy
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English Summary

Film and Media Studies has long lacked a critical framework for analyzing screen acting independent of an actor's performances. Although Media Studies traditions like Star Studies place actors at the centre of their analyses, performance analysis' investment in the cultural semiotics often overlooks or elides the acting work behind that performance. Longstanding biases in formal film analysis, such as the Kuleshov Effect, and auteurist criticism further marginalize the creative agency of screen actors on the presumption that acting is at best subservient to - and at worst a side effect of - other meaning-making forces. Overwhelmingly, these critical frameworks approach screen performance from a spectatorial perspective, addressing the performance on screen as a finished text for semiotic dissection. To break the conflation of screen performance with screen acting and thereby to ascribe some creative agency to the actor, this dissertation approaches screen acting as a practice.

This research therefore combines theoretical and ethnographic methodologies to approach screen acting from the actor outwards towards the audience. The theoretical component takes its cue from the ubiquitous motif of "connections" in influential realist actor training systems. This reads a neurophenomenological model of selfhood, which treats cognitive neuroscience with phenomenological philosophy as mutually informing discourses, into the core practices and principles of major American Method Acting practitioners, such as Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Stella Adler. Although not every screen actor identifies as a Method actor, the common principles and practices of the various Method traditions are sufficiently ubiquitous that they can be treated as commonplace. The core theoretical claim of this dissertation is that these actorly connections are the solicitation of three complimentary, simultaneous, and overlapping empathetic bonds: an Intrasubjective connection between the quotidian actor and her situational character; an Intersubjective connection among performing actors; and, a Performative connection between the performing actor and her anticipated audience through the surrogate camera.

The ethnographic component of this dissertation validates the theoretical model with data gathered during interviews with 15 professional North American screen actors, as well as the author's own decades of experience as a professional actor. This ethnographic component follows the actors' practices from audition preparation to script analysis to performance habits on set. Overall, the interviews present screen acting technique as an amorphous and adaptable enculturation of the actor's bodymind, free to embrace, blend, alter, and ignore whatever commonplace principles of realist acting the actor sees fit as she solicits her empathetic connections. When appropriate, this research punctuates the ethnographic interviews with documented examples from well-known western screen actors, such as Marlon Brando, Daniel Day-Lewis, Diane Keaton, and Robert De Niro. Despite major differences in technique, the ensuing continuity of practices from A-list star actors to the lesser-known actors who were interviewed for this study presents the screen actor's empathetic solicitations as having many viable paths: the goal of soliciting a connection with the targets remains stable, even if the methods towards that goal vary from practitioner to practitioner.

The Introductory Chapter outlines the shortcomings of mainstream critical approaches to analyzing screen acting, which are largely attributable to the inherently spectatorial vantage point that conflates acting with performance. Analyses of the cultural semiotics of a performance's gestures, postures, and vocal intonations struggle to account for the intentionality behind the performance. Kuleshovian reductivism famously negates all actorly agency by presuming that montage will always be film's primary maker of meaning, but cannot account for what happens if an actor starts to perform. As an alternative to these approaches, this chapter suggests that screen acting should be studied in a way that accounts for the actor's intentionality. This research therefore brackets "performance" as an important phase in an actor's work instead of treating it as the entirety of the actor's work. Since Theatre Studies already contains significant research into actors' bodymind processes during performance, this study proposes to specify how the common creativity of realist acting practices across media manifest in screen acting.

Chapter 1's literature review of core concepts in neurophenomenology, empathy, and contemporary acting research provides the necessary critical context for the ensuing analysis. In neurophenomenology, the mind and body (henceforth, the "bodymind") are inextricably interconnected as a self-perpetuating Dynamic System that constantly reorganizes itself to relate to its ever-changing lived circumstances. The bodymind meshwork dissolves any easy distinction between internal perturbations and external stimuli, while also providing a critical framework for how selves can transform over time in their ongoing efforts to make sense of their lived world. This positions the actor's character as a situational self, aspects of the actor's imagination, memory, and corporeal resources cobbled together by the self-organizing bodymind meshwork in a configuration that is not immediately recognizable as the actor's quotidian self.

Neurophenomenology's primary contribution to the study of empathy is the notion of presentations: perceptions from the perspective of a different self than one's own self, which form the bodymind's foundation for empathizing with another person. This section connects mirror neuron research with Vittorio Gallese's contemporary neuroaesthetic modelling of the Mirror Mechanism, a holistic interpretation of the social, cultural, and neuroscientific processes of mirroring. The Mirror Mechanism is then connected to three core philosophical conceptions of empathy: Amy Coplan's criteria for empathetic relationships; Edith Stein's "intentional pull" within empathy; and Susan Feagin's suggestion for the cognitive reconstruction of character personalities while reading literature. Coplan contends that all empathetic relationships across disciplines and applications contain the same three foundational criteria: an Affective Match between observer and target; the observer's Other-Oriented Perspective Taking; and the maintenance of a Self-Other Distinction between observer and target. Stein's phenomenological model of empathy is particularly relevant to the Other-Oriented Perspective Taking criteria because of the suggestion that people are hardwired to reconstruct the intentionality of those who they observe, and are thereby "pulled" towards their target. Feagin effectively extends this capacity for the reconstruction of a target subjectivity's intentionality to realist fictional characters because of the common cognitive scaffolding that the character shares with the reader. The final section of Chapter 1 reviews contemporary Theatre Studies research on realist acting to extrapolate the cognitive and phenomenological models of the common creativity at its core.

Chapter 2 uses the critical concepts introduced in Chapter 1 to present the dissertation's major theoretical model of screen acting as a practice of soliciting empathy. Each of the Intrasubjective, Intersubjective, and Performative connections are qualified through Coplan's criteria for empathetic relationships. Strasberg's Affective Memory exercise exemplifies the kinds of traditionally internal emotional and imaginary work that many actors do to develop relevant presentations towards their Intrasubjective connection. Similarly, Meisner's primary training exercise, the Repetition Game, provides actors with a viable skill set for prioritizing the Intersubjective connection with their scene partners. Although less explicitly prescribed across mainstream Method practices than the Intrasubjective and Intersubjective connections, the actor's Performative solicitation completes realist actor's verisimilar illusion by making the Intrasubjective and Intersubjective connections lucid to the camera.

This model of empathetic connections is perhaps idealistic in that the social, industrial, practical, and personal circumstances that surround screen acting often impact how an actor acts the way that she does, both in general and for a given role. The following three ethnographic actors chart the actor's progressive stages of practice from auditions to script analysis to on-set techniques in terms of how actors commonly generate the necessary presentations for each empathetic solicitation.

Chapter 3 outlines the industrial pressures within acting culture, such as the scarcity of professional work, the economic precarity between acting jobs, and the fickle cruelty of the casting process. Auditions are positioned within the casting process as a highly specialized screen performance style, rather than an example of full-fledged screen acting, due to the fact that most screen auditions only gage the overlap between the actor's Intrasubjective and Performative connections. To further compound the matter, auditioning actors rarely have access to the entire screenplay for the production at hand. A considerable percentage of the audition's Intrasubjective presentations are based on guesswork from the limited version of the screenplay that they are given, which thereby emphasizes their ability to communicate the situational character's cognitive scaffolding to the camera based on intuition, creative insight, and blind hope that the casting director and producer similarly envision the character. In a sense, screen auditions allow the actor to demonstrate a worst-case scenario to the producer and casting director of what her performance would look like if she has no meaningful collection with her fellow actors.

Chapter 4 focuses on common script analysis tactics for screen actors, on the assumption that the auditioning actor of Chapter 3 has been hired for the role. The common tactics for constructing the character's cognitive scaffolding described during my interviews are divided into three major categories that are based on their relative balance of imagination and memory. The "bottom-up" approaches rely on the actor's transposition of her quotidian memories into her character's affective experiences. Actor Kevin McGarry, for example, identifies the fundamental affective values within key moments in his character's emotional life and replaces them with his own comparable experiences, on the assumption that this atomization of experiences makes his performed emotional state relatable for his audiences. The "top-down" approaches, such as actor Danellene O'Flynn's use of archetypes and the adoption of Jungian family archetypes in the screen training regimen at Toronto's Pro Actor's Lab, are primarily reliant on the actor's imagination. In these approaches, the actor creates a compelling imaginary image for her character and "wears" it like an invisible costume, in the hopes that this image

will provoke interesting performance choices when read through the character. The “balanced” approach is by far the most common, wherein the actor freely blends personal recollections and imaginary images during script analysis to connect to a scripted character’s lived experiences. Actor Antonio Cayonne evocatively likens this kind of character work to the mythical Minotaur: a creature with the body of one beast and the head of another. Ultimately, the actor is free to develop her Intrasubjective appresentations of the scripted character however she deems appropriate, on the firm understanding that whatever appresentations she develops must be actionable on set.

Chapter 5 contrasts two common sets of on-set actorly habits for soliciting all three empathetic connections: Dinicol’s Jazz and Lisinska’s Tears. Both sets of habits reflect the ecumenical nature of on-set production culture, and force the actor to develop a compelling metaphor for the camera as a trusted co-collaborator. In Dinicol’s Jazz, the actor prioritizes her Intersubjective connection with her fellow actors in the hopes that the camera will adequately capture the iterative loop of sincere reactions between the performers. This approach is particularly resonant with actors who actively embrace Meisner’s Method. Inversely, Lisinska’s Tears prioritizes the overlap between the actor’s Intrasubjective connection and her Performative solicitation by actively using all on-set circumstances and resources – including the camera. In a sense, Lisinska’s Tears is the logical extension of audition performance techniques to full-fledged screen acting: as long as the Lisinska’s Tears actor can establish enough of an Intersubjective connection with her scene partner to complete the verisimilar illusion, she can focus on addressing her performance to the camera.

The concluding Chapter 6 presents preliminary work on three potential future projects. First, the three empathetic solicitations as supported by Coplan’s criteria could be used as a useful comparative framework for analyzing realist screen acting practices across time periods, localities, and performance traditions. Jared Leto’s on-set antics while shooting *Suicide Squad* and Diane Keaton’s performance in *Annie Hall* are presented as preliminary case studies. Second, this research could be foundational to a theoretical model of collective cognition and collaborative authorship in screen media production. Third and finally, this dissertation suggests that a critical framework for analyzing screen acting practices could lead to new and compelling insights into how actors contribute to film form, especially in light of the growing importance of motion-capture-suit performances and the ensuing collaborations with CGI animators.