

## *Towards Embodied Spectatorship*

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the cognitive approach to spectatorship. There are different aspects that interest theatre scholars in the field of spectating research, for example, how audiences perceive the process of acting, how emotions and empathy work, and how spectators create meanings. The main premise for the cognitive approach to spectating is that the engagement of the audience in the performance is foremost corporeal. The article analyses the roots of this standpoint and poses a question concerning the possibility of measuring the impact of theatre. Further, the statement that for spectators the most significant engagement with a performance is emotional is considered. The concept of empathy and kinaesthetic empathy in particular is discussed. The article suggests that the crucial specification for successful audiences' embodiment is embodied acting and trained body-mind that in fact means coherence within and between the mental and emotional systems. Proposing that most reliable data about the effect of the performance is medical examination, this article introduces the research *Thinking Body: Acting Systems' Analysis and Integration in the Process of the Work of a Contemporary Actor* which was implemented at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2013–2014. The article suggests that interdisciplinary research with the collaboration of theatre scholars and artists as well as specialists of medicine would help estimate what conditions are most favourable for effective communication between performers and spectators.

**Keywords:** cognitive approach, audience, spectatorship, emotion, empathy, affect, embodied acting.

Efforts to reconsider and to reconfigure the relationship between theatre and its audiences were among the most important objectives of various theatre experimenters of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, theatre theoreticians were occupied mostly by describing and analyzing the artistic strategies of directors rather than the engagement of the audience itself. But for the 'emancipated spectator', the discourse relating to theatre audiences recently

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has become one of the main topics in the theatre studies; however, the major interest of researchers remains the kinds or types of theatre that provoke an active audience participation. For example, Gareth White, the author of the study *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of Invitation*, distinguishes two leading models of participatory theatre: *immersive* theatre and *one-to-one* theatre. As White asserts,

fashions for “immersive” theatre and “one-to-one” theatre are in the ascendancy; the former tends to make use of spatial and architectural interventions, and to ask spectators to involve themselves physically in tracking down or pursuing the performance; the latter seeks a more direct relationship with the individual spectator. [White 2013, 2]

### *Cognitive approach to spectatorship*

The idea that the role of the audience in so-called traditional or conventional theatre and non-traditional theatre is absolutely different is very popular. This viewpoint suggests that in conventional theatre audiences are passive. According to Susan Bennett, ‘With [the] social contract put into place, usually by the exchanging of money for a ticket which promises a seat in which to watch an action to unfold, the spectator accepts a passive role and awaits the action which is to be interpreted’ [Bennett 1990, 177]. Meanwhile in non-traditional theatre events, the audience is actively and creatively engaged. However, many philosophers and theatre scholars object identifying the ‘simple’ act of watching as passivity. White also agrees that ‘all audiences are participatory’ [White 2013, 3] even in the case of a very traditional performance with a steady fourth wall. This is the main premise for the cognitive approach to spectating in theatre. The proponents of this approach are mainly interested not in *how* audiences are being engaged in the performance but rather *what* is happening to the spectator while watching it, or *what audiences do*.

In general, it is believed that unlike the theories of the twentieth century, ‘the mind sciences offer no central authority, no revered group of texts that disclose a pathway to the authorized truth’ [Lutterbie 2011, x]. First of all, cognitive studies that include scientific investigation into psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience and also encompass the insights in philosophy, anthropology, and humanities, create a certain framework for understanding, but also challenging various theories and practices that are in the focus of contemporary theatre and performance studies. As Bruce McConachie claims,

Cognitive science can offer empirically tested insights that are directly relevant to many of the abiding concerns of theatre and performance studies, including theatricality, audience reception, meaning making, identity formation, the construction of culture, and processes of historical change. [McConachie 2006,]

There are different aspects that interest theatre scholars in the field of spectating research, for example, how audiences perceive the process of acting, how emotions and empathy work, and how spectators create meanings. It should be said that the cognitive approach to spectatorship visibly differs from semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches. First and foremost, the act of reception of theatre performance should not be equated only to the 'reading' of it<sup>1</sup>, i.e. it is not only about decoding the signs in hermeneutic sense and thus making the meanings. In her famous study *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004) Erika Fischer-Lichte demonstrates that the process of creating meaning in contemporary performance is not hermeneutic in its nature. According to Lichte, the performance cannot be understood, it should rather be experienced. Lichte emphasizes the corporeality of the acts the actors are performing, which replaced the meaning of that act, the same as an audience reaction is foremost bodily. Moreover, the bodily impact on all participants in the performance became the primary purpose and the primary reality of the performance. In *The Dynamics of Drama*, Bernard Beckerman writes about the 'muscular tension' experienced by audience members:

Although theatre response seems to derive principally from visual and aural perception, in reality it relies upon a totality of perception that could be better termed kinesthetic. We are aware of a performance through varying degrees of concentration and relaxation within our bodies. ... We might very well say that an audience does not see with its eyes but with its lungs, does not hear with its ears but with its skin [cited in Freshwater 2009, 18].

The roots of this holistic attitude go back to so-called *cognitive turn* or *bodily turn* of the second part of the twentieth century. The ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty have essentially changed the approach to the expression of body and the structure of experience. Merleau-Ponty rejected the dualism of mind and body and gave a special prominence to lived body (*Leib*), which takes part in the constitution of experience: the world comes into being and is experienced through the body. To put it in another way, our relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> In his study on performance and cognition, Howard Mancing directly assaults the approach to watching a play as a process of reading: "Perceptual understanding, the primary cognitive mode in nature, is not at all linguistic, and by definition it cannot involve "reading"" [Mancing 2006, 191].

the world is corporeal. The findings in neuroscience demonstrated that mind does not passively accept the sensory data, but rather provides with a kinaesthetic awareness of the place and space and devises some action plans to engage with the environment. Many scholars, who investigated the correlation between thinking and perceiving, stated that perceiving is a kind of acting.<sup>2</sup> Alva Noë, for instance, in his book *Action in Perception* (2004) claimed that “perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. ... The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction. ... We enact our perceptual experience; we act it out” [cited in Zarrilli *et alii* 2013, 26].

In this respect, performing as well as spectating can be viewed as cognitive activities. Bruce McConachie introduces the term *ecology of spectating*. Relying on the observation that the modes of spectating are highly context-dependent, he claims that activities of spectating are always embedded in a material and social situation: “From an Enaction perspective, perception, like the rest of cognition, is not only embodied and embedded, it is also ecologically extended. Spectators use their material and social surroundings as well as their bodies and brains to take action and make meaning during a performance” [McConachie 2013, 186]. Certainly, the surroundings and social determination are important in the process of spectating, but I suggest that nevertheless an actor is the most important agency. I will elaborate this argument later in this text.

### *Is it possible to measure the impact of the theatre?*

Most of the approaches treat spectatorship as a general process, i.e. they analyze the mechanisms of perceiving, necessary conditions, confines and influential factors etc., but they do not try to evaluate the effectiveness of communication that in fact is the main concern of theatre. Or if they do, usually the arguments are speculative. One might assert that it is impossible to measure the impact of the performance on the audience and this is partly true. The only reliable data could be questionnaires of the audience members and/or medical measurements.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the works of Tim Ingold *The Perception of Environment* (2000) and *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011) or studies of Mark Johnson *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1987) and *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007). The main premise for the **perception-action** approach is that evolution shaped humans’ perceptual processing primarily for action (not for reaction or information gathering).

One of the complicated aspects of this problem is that what we call “the audience” is not a singular or homogeneous entity. The responses of the spectators might be very diverse and sometimes unexpected, for they depend on many factors such as class, gender, nationality, religious background, ethnicity, sexuality, geographical location, and education. Thus, it would be more relevant to talk about the “audiences” rather than the “audience”. However, sometimes theatre researchers and especially theatre critics speculate about an “audience response”, relying only on their own personal reception or a throughout subjective observation of the auditorium. Usually this works as a support of the writer’s arguments. Yet, as Helen Freshwater notes,

[the] engagement with “ordinary” members of the audience is notably absent from theatre studies. ... While academic theatre studies continues to engage with hypothetical models of spectatorship, statistical analysis of historical audiences, or the writer’s personal experience, theatre marketing departments are busy surveying the opinions and responses of real audiences... ... This may be surprising, but academic scholarship and the theatre industry have very different motivations for their interest in audiences and pursue very different forms of inquiry as a result [Freshwater 2009, 29-30].

One could propose that namely the cognitive approach to spectatorship is about “ordinary” members of the audience. However, even the proponents of this approach do not avoid purely hypothetical insights. Considering spectating as a cognitive activity, in some cases they automatically transfer the knowledge about general cognition to spectating and without any scientific proof the result is nothing but an interesting assumption.

### *The domain of emotion*

Many researchers of spectatorship claim that for spectators the most significant engagement with a performance is emotional “because emotions are the most relevant index of spectator enjoyment and meaning-making” [McConachie 2013, 189]. McConachie proposes that “Good performance situations provide a safe space in which actors and spectators can explore many of their emotional vulnerabilities and needs without embarrassment” [*Ibid*, 189]. Furthermore, he claims that “The length and intensity of dramatically generated emotions are crucial factors in shaping the emergence of meanings for spectators” [*Ibid*, 194]. Both arguments, regarding the therapeutic aspect and intensifying the process of meaning-making, are worth reconsidering.

Let's start with posing the question: Is the performance situation really a "safe space" and are the spectators as well as the actors really sheltered from "embarrassment"? In 2013, together with my colleagues-artists at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, physiotherapists and specialists of biomedicine we initiated the experimental research project *Thinking Body: Acting Systems' Analysis and Integration in the Process of the Work of a Contemporary Actor*. The most innovative part of the project was the evaluation of the cardiovascular indicators of the students of acting with different psycho-emotional status performing dramatic, comic and tragic roles as well as relaxation exercises.<sup>3</sup> The students were asked to perform one monologue from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in three different manners – as drama, tragedy and comedy in the way they felt it (with no director's references). The aim of the study was to assess dynamic characteristics of the students "ECG parameters, depending on the subjects" psycho-emotional status during different genre roles. The basis of the study was the findings of psychophysiologicalists in heart-brain neurodynamics and particularly the insight that through its extensive interactions with the brain and body, the heart emerges as a critical component of the emotional system.<sup>4</sup>

The research revealed considerable dynamic changes in the RP parameter (regulatory system) and JT parameter (heart metabolism).<sup>5</sup> To put it simply, this means that the actor's organism, while experiencing various emotions, gets strongly misbalanced during the process of performing. In other words, performers are experiencing a high level of stress. Interestingly, the maximum individual change coincided with that of the person's favourite genre, which among most of the participants was tragedy. According to the authors of the research, these results can be considered as positive since they demonstrate the actors' empathy with the character or the engagement in a theatrical

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<sup>3</sup> The examination was made by medical researchers Alfonsas Vainoras, Ernesta Sendžikaitė and Roza Joffé, all working at the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, and Tadas Telksnys, a specialist of applied mathematics.

<sup>4</sup> This concept was elaborated by Rollin McCraty, the Director of Research of the HeartMath Research Center at the Institute of HeartMath based in California. See his publication "Heart-Brain Neurodynamics: The Making of Emotions" on <https://www.heartmath.org/assets/uploads/2015/03/heart-brain-neurodynamics.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The research was introduced in the publications 'Evaluation of the Cardiovascular Indicators of Future Actors with Different Psycho-Emotional Status Performing Dramatic, Comic and Tragic Roles as well as Relaxation Exercises' in a collection of scientific articles *Acting Reconsidered: New Approaches to Actor's Work* (Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy, 2014) and 'Changes of Future Actors ECG Parameters During Different Genre Roles' in the proceedings of the international conference *Biomedical Engineering 2014* (Kaunas University of Technology, 2014).

situation. The students themselves described their state while performing tragedy as satisfying and creative. The problem occurs after the performance when even after the relaxation exercises the organism does not return to its normal condition. That was especially true of the students with stronger symptoms of depression. Thus the effect at least on the actors is not therapeutic at all.

Of course the nature of the research was purely experimental and some limitations should be considered (for example, there was no “true” audience, only the researchers; the time of the performance was quite short; the experiment ought to be repeated under different circumstances etc). Moreover, the findings of the experiment deserve further analysis. They gave a strong impulse to reconsider the current methods of actors training as well as to explore the most favourable conditions for creation – of actors and of spectators.

It is possible that the audience’s physiological answer would respond to the actor’s curve of dynamic changes in the regulatory system and heart metabolism, i.e. the intensive emotions of the actor might cause the intensive emotional response from the audience. This can be possible because of the corporeal character of the perception: the body of a spectator reacts to the body of an actor. Moreover, the stated assumption can be grounded by the mechanism of empathy which, according to McConachie, is “crucial for spectators attempting to negotiate and understand both the theatrical and the dramatic levels of all performances’ [McConachie 2013, 191]. Because empathy leads spectators to emotional engagements<sup>6</sup>, it might seem that emotions are prioritized by many researchers as well as by creators of new acting and actors training methods. Discovery of the corporeal nature of an emotion as well as the implication that the actor does not have to experience the “real” emotion himself/herself in order to be “truthful” has led to various investigations of how to produce an emotion on stage. Here, the research of experimental psychologist Paul Ekman was of great importance. Briefly, Ekman, in his study *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve*

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<sup>6</sup> Current scientific definitions of “empathy” range widely. The ‘theory of mind’ advocated by some psychologists in the last decades of the twentieth century was demolished, for empathy is largely unconscious and proactive. Neurobiologist and phenomenologist Evan Thompson understands empathy from an Enaction point of view. For Thompson, empathy is a four-level mechanism, starting from ‘sensorimotor coupling’ based on the networks of mirror neurons, and ending up with ‘golden-rule’ ethics which causes fairness and respect in human relationship. See: Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 393-402.

*Communication and Emotional Life* (2003), has shown that consciously chosen muscular actions affect the emotional state (however, he mostly concentrated on the facial muscles). One of the most coherent methods based on the scientific discovery that the conscious reproduction of certain physiological symptoms can provoke the affective experience of emotion, is Susana Bloch's *Alba Emoting, A Psychophysiological Technique to Help Actors Create and Control Real Emotions*. This method is based on the effector patterns of different emotions. In short, Bloch suggests that the control of breathing, muscular tension and activity, and facial expression can generate emotion.<sup>7</sup>

Why is it so important for an actor to know how to (re)produce an emotion? As Rhonda Blair claims, "The powerful degree of interpretation involved in translating emotional/body states into feeling<sup>8</sup> reinforces the idea of the actor's freedom to think creatively in imagining a role" [Blair 2006, 176]. As for the spectators, they wish to experience deep emotions at the theatre; however, the question is not so unambiguous. The first question is whether only the ability to create a concrete emotion opens up the creativity of an actor. The second question is whether only the recognition of an emotion evokes the emotional audience response (for recognition is not the same as embodiment). And finally we can ask whether emotional experience is the only one we expect as theatre goers.

Empirical observations as well as testimonies of the actors confirm that audience responses might be quite controversial. Every actor from his/her experience could testify that sometimes all the actions performed in order to produce a certain emotion are right; however, they do not get an adequate response or feedback from the audience. Or the emotion can be recognizable, but it does not "infect" or "affect" the audience.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the techniques

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<sup>7</sup> More about *Alba Emoting* see Bloch, S. *The Development of Alba Emoting*, BYU-Idaho Press, 2003 and Bloch, S., Orthous, P. and Santibañez-H, G. 'Effector Patterns of Basic Emotions: A psychophysiological method for training actors' in *Acting (Re)Considered. A Theoretical and Practical Guide*. 2nd edition. Ed. Phillip B. Zarrilli. Routledge, 2002, p. 219-238.

<sup>8</sup> Many acting researchers have turned back to the investigations of emotions by the prominent neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. He has demonstrated that emotions are biological responses or brain representations of the states of the body, while feelings are conscious mental formulations of the emotions. According to Damasio, feelings 'translate the ongoing life state in the language of the mind' [Damasio 1999, 85]. A feeling is 'the perception of a certain state of the body along with the perception of a certain mode of thinking and of thoughts with certain themes' [*Ibid*, 86].

<sup>9</sup> Here the fervid outgiving of Anne Bogart is relevant: "I cringe if I hear an actor say, "If I feel it, they will feel it". The notion that the actor and the audience feel the same sensations at the same moment leads to a solipsistic approach to acting and easy dismissal on the part of the audience" [Bogart 2010, x].

that only teach an actor to produce emotions can be considered as quite limited. Moreover, a human being is not controlled only by emotions; we also have our beliefs, intensions etc. And what we expect from theatre is not only “enjoying ourselves” by experiencing emotions, as McConachie puts; we also expect some new comprehension of life and ourselves. Thus, the thesis that intensive emotions provoke thinking and reflection is not always valid. A good illustration could be the comparison of two genres – melodrama and tragedy. Melodrama brings an emotional relief, while tragedy alongside the emotions produces some new understanding. On the other hand, science has proved that the most pervasive thoughts are those fuelled by the greatest intensity of emotion. However, it tells nothing about the nature of those thoughts – whether they are critical or stereotypical.

Ultimately, we should consider cogitating not about *emotional* empathy, but rather *kinesthetic* empathy. The term was appropriated mostly from dance studies that presented quite a lot of valuable research in this field.<sup>10</sup> Kinesthetic empathy means that spectators experience the actor as not or not only as a new identity, which consists of the actor’s and character’s identities as the cognitive approach suggests, but foremost as a moving body. As Dee Reynolds puts, “Kinesthetic empathy is linked to the affect rather than to the emotion. This means that kinesthetic empathy can be considered as embodied intensity which has an impact on the spectator in a kinesthetic manner” [cited in Pavis 2014, 7]. “Affect” is a broader concept than “emotion” and it involves a spectrum of experiential phenomena – physical, emotional and behavioural. However, scientists strongly disagree about this term.

Whether empathy is kinesthetic or of another kind, we can agree with McConachie who claims that “There is no guarantee, however, that empathizing spectators will succeed in embodying and understanding the emotions and beliefs of actor/characters, performer-facilitators, or even fellow audience members” [McConachie 2013, 193]. In my opinion, this is so because there is still no evidence what relationship is between impact or affect and meaning-making. Anyway, the main concern of theatre makers is how to enable new experience for the audience, how to establish the most favourable circumstances for effective communication, even if the notion of “effectiveness” is quite unspecified. As a handicap for successful communication which produces

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Matthew Reason, Dee Reynolds, Marie-Hélène Grosbras and Frank E. Pollick “Researching Dance Across Disciplinary Paradigms: A Reflective Discussion of the Watching Dance Project”. In: *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science. Body, Brain and Being*. Ed. Nicola Shaughnessy. Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 39-56.

new experience, McConachie considers initial cultural stereotypes. I would suggest that the reason for communication failure is not only cultural stereotypes but many other factors as well, and the acting (performing) is of the utmost importance. Or not even the performing, but the state of the actor. The researchers at the Institute of Heart Math have demonstrated that creativity as well as other parameters such as reaction times, mental clarity and problem solving, is influenced by the degree of coherence of mental and emotional systems. As Rollin McCraty puts, "When the mental and emotional systems are in sync, we have greater ability to manifest our visions and goals, as the power of emotion is aligned with the mind's capacities" [McCraty].

The notions of **bodymind**<sup>11</sup> and of **embodied acting** used by some theatre practitioners might be treated as the equivalent of the concept of coherence. Likewise, theatre makers propose to train embodied acting and the actor's bodymind in order to enhance the actor-audience communication. What is embodied acting? The essence can be described simply: when the actor is aware of what is happening in his/her body, when he/she is open to the impulses of the environment, then his/her imagination and memory unclose. So it can be stated that embodied acting is a dynamic psychophysical (psychophysiological) process, during which an actor, while responding to the impulses of the environment, feels, perceives, imagines, and remembers. More investigations are needed; however, it can be presumed that the skills of the embodied acting might enable the embodiment of spectating, for, as Patrice Pavis formulates, "the audience embodies actors" embodiment' [Pavis 2014, 8]. In fact, empathy itself is embodiment.

### *Instead of conclusions*

We can celebrate the intensity of emotional engagement, however, it should not damage or destabilize – this concerns actors as well as spectators. It is nothing about "optimistic" or "positive" art. Rather, it is about creating conditions for productive exchange between actors and the audience. The interdisciplinary research with collaboration of theatre scholars and artists

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<sup>11</sup> There are quite a few descriptions what bodymind is. As Rick Kemp suggests, a holistic concept of the bodymind means the reflexive and integrated relationship between physicality, thought, emotion and expression [Kemp 2012, xv]. According to Melissa Hurt, "Bodymind refers to the actor when she works with awareness of what she feels, does and understands... The bodymind includes the actor's feelings, perceptions, mood, and somatic knowledge that continuously exchange information in a biofeedback circuit" [Hurt 2014, 9].

as well as specialists of medicine would help estimate what conditions are most favourable for effective communication between performers and spectators. It seems that the objective should be to find the ways how to re-establish the coherence in heart-brain communication of the actor as well as of the spectator. Only then can the creativity of the actor fully unfold and the sensibility of the spectator intensifies.

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