

Imagination and Embodiment of Images

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Returning to the question: How do we conduct and frame research in embodied technique through performance practice? The body is a deeply phenomenological, epistemic object; having the quality of displaying disparate attributes when examined in different situations or events, and from different perspectives. The *exercise* or *task* frame the practice situation, yet still they offer infinitely complex attributes to examine. How then do we relatively reliably examine specific “layers” of embodiment, embodied phenomena, on repeated excursion and in greater detail? How do we travel down a pathway when the woods are precarious, not just trees?

Perhaps by extending the notion of *preparation* as elaborated in Sanford Meisner’s *Sanford Meisner on Acting*: “Preparation is that device which permits you to start your play or scene in a condition of emotional aliveness.” “The purpose of preparation is simple: it has to do with self-stimulation.” In the context of Meisner technique, which celebrates dynamic play within the circumstances of the scene (the practice situation), a preparation enables the practitioner to repeatedly traverse a specific pathway without interrupting the organicity of the play itself, rather proceeding it. Meisner stressed this tactic in relation individual research- the practitioner develops a bank of exciting options which can take any form, their efficacy varying over repeated attempts. We seek to conduct research on the level of a community, which dictates we adapt this tactic to discover relatively reliable affordances of a group of bodies.

In the session, we experimented with two types of preparation: discourse, and selected exercises from existing techniques. Both serve to charge the bodies with specific information, awareness and availability in complementary ways. For the purpose of a specific interest in the relationship of *imagination and embodiment*, we referred to exercises from the chapter *Imagination and Incorporation of Images* from Michael Chekov’s *To the Actor*. To summarize, the exercises encourage a process of: (1) manifesting an image from an association or impulse; (2) breathing life into the image by opening a discourse with in, observing how it organically unfolds and actively manipulating it as to induce an emotional response; (3) embodying the image and tracing the serendipitous deviations and shifts which occur in this process, both on the level of the image and of embodiment. This tactic helped “tune” into an intended “current”, a mode of being, and track the depth and breadth of its various affordances.

The first session, enacted by Ruby and Ariel, offered two distinct experiences afforded by the same preparation. (Subsequent sessions revealed how the same bodies can themselves afford radically different experiences stemming from a similar, albeit gradually more nuanced, preparation.) Ariel shared that she experienced the images rapidly transforming and combining in surprising and “trippy” ways. Ruby

described the experience of a singular image (a lost yellow balloon) affected by constant imaginary stimuli. Both discussed the way in which the imagination-embodiment experience organically manifested in relation to a dialogue of image, body, and external stimuli (such as music), the image and body in a recursive ignition. How can external stimuli be used to shape this experience?

When singling out a progressively particular frame of research, as to continue travelling down a progressively nuanced pathway, we named an intersecting “sub-spectrum”: perceptible-imperceptible, communicated-hidden, look like-feel like, direct-indirect. How does the intention of making the image perceptible through embodiment, to various degrees, affect the experience of the imagination-embodiment process? Notable is a recurring prioritization of the experience over its expression, which is perhaps indicative of the general practice situation and the kinds of research it affords.

After the second session, Ariel recalled having a more emotional experience driven by memory, the transformations happening more gradually in relation to the previous session. Omer recounted his experience as that of being a child in a candy store- images manifested and embodied apace- and tracking these processes as conducted through distinct mechanisms. Both discussed the coherence of the embodied thread or narrative, interlinking the images, and their embodiment. Whether that sense of narrative appears story-like or as an association stream, it is naturally coherent to the one enacting. How do the distance of the association leaps and their frequency affect the process? Thus, we named an additional intersecting sub-spectrum: mundane-fantastic, real-surreal, daily-extra daily. How does the distance between the quality of the image and ability of the body affect the imagination-embodiment process?

After the third session, Ruby revealed a process of actively generating impossible images, and thus forcing the body to find immediate, spontaneous, abstract, and surprising solutions: “Insert something non-sensical to make the experience more magical”. By challenging embodiment in this way- the mind helplessly rushing to create logic in the fantastic imagery and dissect the response of the body- it is coaxed into a reactive state. The relationship of imagination-embodiment transforms and combines more freely and expressively. Omer explored the other extreme of the spectrum, playing with daily, mundane memories which hold an emotional charge, and which stirred joy in the body. In the experience of embodying these images, crystalized new qualities and loci of intrigue in the memories.

In concluding the three sessions, endured a want to continue travelling down this pathway, to continue *zooming in*. This process could perhaps be sustained by introducing additional preparatory exercises which *flesh out* the imagination; integrating additional tactics as to strengthen the imagination, embodiment, and their relation as to maintain a constant radiant, kinetic flux. For example, the lineage of Stanislavsky (specifically of Method acting; for example, see *The Method Acting*

Exercises Handbook by Lola Cohen) offers concrete, relatively reliable tactics for developing an agile and dexterous imagination using the “sense memory”, and the ability of the bodies to embody, react and fulfill. How do the techniques sedimented in the bodies of the practitioners shape the practice? In the context of performance practice: How does previous performance training impact the practice?

Actively exciting the imagination served to strengthen the awareness and availability of embodiment, an instance of “flow” which serves as a research threshold, a primary impulse, “knowing there is something there”. Strongest, and most effective, was manifesting imagination which challenged and overwhelmed embodiment to such a degree that *something breaks*, “you are no longer in control of what the body does” - a potential space is created. This tactic brings to mind the tricky oppositions in *Plastic Exercises*, detailed in Jerzy Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre*, whose “fundamental principle is the study of opposite vectors” for the purpose of “the study of one’s own means of expression, of their resistances and their common centres in the organism”.

Throughout the three sessions, it appeared that the spectator could reliably account for the imperceptible process of the enactor, noting how they experienced the images unfolding in relation to space and time and external stimuli. This is significant as it opens the possibility of employing these accumulated tactics in a performative situation; and contending their potential to be rigorously researched as substantial, new performance technique.

How did these two types of preparation affect the research? Utilizing an existing exercise from another practice proved highly effective. Relying on discourse as preparation yielded mixed outcomes. While specifying the research pathway through discourse allowed a sustained curiosity, it remains indecisive in reliably inciting specific experiences in different bodies. The merit of discourse in this context is in negotiating the perspective from which the participants observed the process: on the level of introspection and reflection as enactors, and of engagement and synthesis as the spectators. That is, while the processes themselves were radically divergent, the discourse allows for their convergence in communication. This has immense value in embodied research. Additionally, the discourse serves as an intermediary of the association stream originating in the session as it is carried it into language; allowing the participants to reorganize their thoughts verbally by reflecting through the group, and let-out steam still stored from the session.

As a side note, the practice was accompanied by the consumption of red wine. I find it worth mentioning in the context of research in the experience of imagination-embodiment, as the effect of the alcohol on the process of association was recognized as positive during discourse. Similarly, working with closed eyes seemed to reliably “boost” the vividness of the imagination, and rendered its embodiment more nuanced and somatic, or less reliant on form and spatial composition.