

The Mediation of the Actor's Body in Theatre Cultures: Presence, Figure, and Monstration

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Abstract The aim of this essay is to illustrate the way in which the actor-performer's body is conceived as an instance of mediation through which the mimetic sharing of the performative experience takes place, thus highlighting to what extent the forms of writing of the actor's body lead the spectator to forms of empathic identification. This contribution addresses the theme of the relationship between body, emotions, and language by taking the actor's corporeal presence as an exemplary apparatus in which this triadic relation becomes observable in its most immediate and material form. The body is approached not as a metaphor or as a mere vehicle for expression, but as a semiotic and affective device whose modes of appearing, displaying and shaping gestures mediate between perceptual, emotional, and linguistic processes. The analysis of stage presence therefore offers a privileged perspective on how emotions are produced, transmitted, and interpreted through corporeal configurations, and on how these configurations articulate a form of non-verbal – yet intrinsically semiotic – language. By focusing on the pre-expressive organisation of movement, on the actor's body schema and on the pathemic effects generated in the spectator, this essay aims to contribute to the broader interdisciplinary discussion on how emotions become meaningful through embodied forms of communication.

Keywords: effects of presence, bodily enunciation, mediation, intercorporeality, intentional attunement

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0. Introduction

Corporeality has begun to gain a prominent status in the study of the theatrical phenomenon during the 20th century only¹. This delay is quite akin to that of semiotics in addressing the issue of perception as a gateway to meaning, namely of the shift from the dimension of perception to that of axiology. The aim of this essay is not to trace a

¹ For further discussion see, e.g., De Marinis (2017). In this respect, the notion of corporeality adopted here follows the semiotic tradition that conceives the body not as a pre-signifying substrate but as a fully meaningful instance, articulated through its plastic formants and gestural configurations (Fontanille 2004, 2011; De Luca 2021). Corporeality is understood in a semiotic sense, that is, as a culturally and perceptively shaped instance of meaning production, whose plastic, rhythmic and gestural formants constitute the very material of enunciation.

genealogy of the body in Western cultures², which is beyond the purpose of this contribution, but rather to illustrate the way in which the actor-performer's body is conceived as an instance of mediation through which the mimetic sharing of the performatic³ experience takes place, thus highlighting to what extent the forms of writing of the actor's body lead the spectator to forms of empathic identification. The word *mimetic* is here used to refer to the intentional creation of forms in a simulative manner: «the facial expressions a stage actor makes on purpose to convey some emotional state to an audience are examples of mimetic (intentional) forms» (Sebeok, Danesi 2000: 45)⁴. For the materiality of the actor-performer's body is what relates directly to the spectators' body, affecting and placing them in a corresponding state of excitability. Throughout the paper, therefore, a few broader theoretical stances on corporeality will necessarily be tackled, as more detailed issues emerge such as to require a deeper epistemological background as a reference. Ultimately, we shall focus quite briefly on the relationship between corporeality and enunciation, referring also to some of the most significant and recent semiotic contributions on the issue.

This contribution addresses the theme of the relationship between body, emotions, and language by taking the actor's corporeal presence as an exemplary apparatus in which this triadic relation becomes observable in its most immediate and material form. The body is approached not as a metaphor or as a mere vehicle for expression, but as a semiotic and affective device whose modes of appearing, displaying and shaping gestures mediate between perceptual, emotional, and linguistic processes. The analysis of stage presence therefore offers a privileged perspective on how emotions are produced, transmitted, and interpreted through corporeal configurations, and on how these configurations articulate a form of non-verbal – yet intrinsically semiotic – language. By focusing on the pre-expressive organisation of movement, on the actor's body schema and on the pathemic effects generated in the spectator, this essay aims to contribute to the broader interdisciplinary discussion on how emotions become meaningful through embodied forms of communication.

Before addressing the matter of the (construction and reception of the effects of) presence, the underlying theoretical premise is to consider the body not as an objective *natural* reality but as a signifier and a signified, in other words, as the very threshold of semiosis. Indeed, the body is always endowed with a project in the world. Hence, in this paper we shall examine the corporeality of the actor from the idea – according to Simona Stano –

of abandoning any supposed distinction between the pre-semiotic and the semiotic, and of studying corporeality not as the mere locus but as the very instance of translation between these regimes – an instance that, due precisely to the translation task it performs, emerges as the threshold par excellence of

² See Violi (2003), Basso Fossali (2009), Niola (2012), and Stano (2019) to name but a few.

³ The term *performatic*, introduced by Fabrizio Deriu (2012) who borrows it, in turn, from the anthropologist Diana Taylor (2003), is a category employed with the aim of reinforcing the specificity of the artistic feature of “performative doing”, with respect to the complexity of activities, behaviours and genres that circulate in the continuum of performative activities, thus enabling us to define much more specific criteria of pertinence.

⁴ That said, it should be noted that mimetic sharing represents only one of the possible modes of performative interaction. Contemporary performance practices also mobilize non-mimetic forms of shared experience (participatory, relational, affective or non-representational), in which performer and spectator are attuned through perceptual, rhythmic or interaffective dynamics rather than through imitation or simulation. The focus on mimetic processes therefore does not exclude these other modalities but seeks to clarify one specific semiotic mechanism within a broader spectrum of performative relations.

semiosis, since it is capable of generating, interpreting and at the same time circulating meaning (2019: 158, my translation).

Accordingly, any theatre culture develops its own theory of acting, assigning proper and fluctuating values to the actor's corporeality, thus establishing its own organising system of vision on which the actor-spectator relationship is then shaped and arranged (Zarrilli 2009). The constitutive feature of each theatre culture, therefore, seems to be the nurturing of the expressive form, i.e. of the apparatus-figure with which the actor appears to the spectator. A media apparatus which, like all media, is often compelled to survival strategies (*mediamorphosis*)⁵ aimed at the renewal of its own language⁶.

1. The (construction of) stage presence

As for the term /theatre/, the notion of /presence/ is likewise conditioned by the semantic overlapping resulting from a series of meanings embedded in this term, which often intertwine different extents, such as ontological, metaphysical, cognitive and performative one. As Herman Parret (2002) reminds us, presence is not an ontological property of the performer but an enunciative effect arising from the co-actuality of perceiving and appearing subjects within a shared sensory field. So much could be said about this multifaceted concept; however, we shall focus exclusively on a few theoretical approaches that are particularly relevant in the narrower context of the theatrical performative arts and on the circumstances that foster the emerging of the phenomena of presence.

The idea that someone may 'have presence' as an objectively real quality raises questions about what this quality consists of, whether it may be trained or cultivated, and to what extent it may be enhanced by the perceptions and expectations of those who witness it (Goodall 2008: 3).

In most of the writings of actors and directors, or of critics and theorists, in Western culture, "presence" is described as an ineffable and mysterious quality owned by performers that occurs while they are engaged in the act of performing or even outside the stage frame. For instance, regarding the acting skills of actress Eleonora Duse, the New York Herald wrote of a "latent power". In fact, Duse was said to exhibit such a strong and seductive presence that a new word became part of the American idiom, the term *doozy* – resulting from a mispronunciation of her surname – which meant something exceptional and absolutely unique (Rader 2018). Something that also radiated off the stage, as recounted by soprano Alice Nielson who met Duse in 1906 at the opening of the Shuberts' Waldorf Theatre. The American star confessed that she was moved «simply to be in the presence of Duse, who appeared saintlike to her, quite literally glowing: "A luminous unearthly sort of light emanated from her face and seemed to form a halo round her turbaned head"» (Rader 2018: 267).

However, this essentializing and quasi-mystical conception of presence has been critically reconsidered in performance theory. Scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) and Josette Féral (2012) have shown that presence should not be understood as an ineffable inner quality possessed by certain performers, but rather as an emergent, relational and processual phenomenon arising in the perceptual feedback loop between actor and spectator. Although these critiques highlight the limits of essentialist interpretations, historical accounts such as Antonin Artaud's remain useful for

⁵ The reference hereto is to the concept as outlined by Roger Fidler (1997).

⁶ See, for example, Beato (2022) regarding the evolution from mask to face in theatre cultures.

understanding how certain theatre traditions conceptualised presence in energetic terms. These views do not represent theoretical models endorsed here, but they illustrate how presence has been imagined within different cultural and aesthetic contexts. In fact, while investigating which modes of expression were able to convey a kind of fascination in the spectators – especially at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – many theatre directors and pedagogues also turned on the Eastern performance traditions when developing their acting training methods, often assuming that these traditions preserved a specific “alchemical” tenet capable of explaining the mechanisms fostering the emergence of such a presence effect (Goodall 2008). Among these, for example, one might include Artaud (1938), who was particularly fascinated by the presence effects achieved by the performers in the Balinese theatre. His remarks reveal how stage presence – i.e. the presence that arises in the act of performing – is a phenomenon primarily tied to the figure of the performer, whose corporeality is not ascribable to something ordinary, usual, but rather displays an *eccentricity* with respect to the everyday. As a matter of fact, the *impression*⁷ of energy can be interpreted as the apperception of a “salience”⁸ understood in René Thom’s morphogenetic sense of *saillance*, that is, the perceptual emergence of a form produced by threshold phenomena within a field of forces (Thom 1991). This emergence is generated by the recognition of threshold dynamics in the performer’s body, as a result of the plastic formants that shape the figure by projecting defined and enclosed images, marked by refrains, rhymes and other isotopies of expression.

Eugenio Barba too refers to energy. He attempts to qualify this term through a comparative analysis of various theatre cultures, not only Western ones, such as Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Balinese, with the aim of providing a constellation of meanings that relate to the concepts of presence and life force. He states that what they all refer to is a *power*; for acquiring that,

which is an intangible, indescribable and unmeasurable quality, the various codified theatrical forms use very particular procedures. These procedures are designed to destroy the inert positions of the performer’s body, in order to alter normal balance and to eliminate daily movement dynamics (Barba, Savarese 1991: 74).

Thus, the presence effect might be related above all to the perception of an extra-daily appearance and performative action. According to Barba (1993), one may identify certain technical tenets underpinning the performer’s⁹ extra-daily behaviour, among which he points out notably the alteration of balance and everyday posture, which lends a salience to the actor’s presence, generating a network of tensions in the body that have an impact on the spectator’s perception. Such extra-ordinary behaviour of the performer thus engenders an unusual, uncommon body, which in turn provokes an *alienation effect*, i.e. it makes an intersubjectively recognisable behaviour such as walking, picking up a pen and writing, smoking, etc. unexpected – and therefore not corresponding to one’s expectations. In other words, these are actions which, compared to everyday life, are performed with a different quality, perceived as a greater use of energy.

Hence, since the 20th century, almost all methods of actor training have been concerned with exercising the performer in the production of energy, and with learning how to

⁷ «[D]e ces signes efficaces et dont on a l’impression que depuis des millénaires, l’efficacité ne s’est pas épuisée» (Artaud [1938] 2019: 86). For further semiotic insight into the concept of energy in Artaud, see Di Tommaso (2008).

⁸ cf. Fabbri, Perri (2019).

⁹ Barba prefers to speak more in terms of actor-dancer.

manage tensions and impulses to convert – to *translate* – the energies of everyday life into *something* more effective and purposeful to be *shaped*. This process corresponds, in semiotic terms, to what has been described as *gesturing*: the analogic conversion of organic movements into culturally shaped gestural forms (Fontanille 2004), articulated through rhythmic and plastic configurations (De Luca 2021) and rooted in the «techniques of the body» identified by Marcel Mauss (1934). In this sense, the performers' ability to convert organic movement into salient gestural configurations directly contributes to what is commonly described as stage presence. So, it is not by chance that «[the] presence belongs to those actors we cannot take our eyes off, who are riveting, who draw us in, are magnetic, charming, and charismatic» (Trenos 2014: 64). In *Stage Presence*, for instance, Jane Goodall (2008) illustrates how the phenomenon of presence is a changing and dynamic product of the social construction emerging, in our culture, from two models of human presence, tied to the figure of the dignitary and the magus:

To the first belong all the regimes of training and technical prowess: elocution and vocal technique, deportment, the aesthetics of gesture and facial expression. The second is suggested in the more mysterious qualities of magnetism and mesmerism, a sense of inner power being radiated outwards. The sphere of the dignitary is the social world with all its powerplay; that of the magus is a wider cosmos, governed by metaphysical forces (2008: 8).

The idea of the actor as an audience enchanter, as a magician, is also to be found in Evelyn Tribble's study of theatre in Shakespearean times, where «the ability to produce 'significant' or meaningful movement through the managed body is akin to sorcery, a reminder that the secret of both the actor and the conjurer is to manage and direct attention and affect» (2017: 25). Once again, presence is supposedly related to an alleged ability to transcend the natural and to allow the subject who exerts it to rise to a higher realm usually reserved for entities deemed superhuman, such as deities or spirits. Likewise according to Joseph Roach, for example, presence would be closely tied to a kind of fascination that certain subjects would exert, without any effort whatsoever, and which is labelled as the *it-effect*: «“It” is the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them» (2007: 26).

In the history of theatrical performatic practices within all cultures, then, training methods and approaches might aim to develop (and normalise) the actors' presence¹⁰. Furthermore, such ponderings must reckon with the condition of double articulation that concerns the corporeality of the performer, according to which one could conceive the body as “matter” (which presents itself on stage) and the body as figure (which is represented on stage)¹¹. Nonetheless, as Maria José Contreras Lorenzini (2008) clearly points out, referring to the materiality of the body in the performative act ought not to lead us to an ontologisation of presence: presence never occurs as an objective natural reality, but on the contrary is always being determined by the semiotic articulation that defines it. «Insofar as artists aimed not to represent but only to present a 'fragment of life', this presentation [...] is always bound to a certain representational aspect» (2008: 152, my translation). In other words, the construction of stage presence often involves the elaboration of a *strategic presence*, understood as a communicative modality capable of attracting or holding the spectator's attention. Yet this is not the only possibility: several

¹⁰ cf. Pini (2018; 2021).

¹¹ cf. Contreras Lorenzini 2008: 147.

contemporary performance practices – such as the “non-dance movement”¹² – deliberately suspend seduction and virtuosity in favour of ordinary, understated or almost imperceptible gestures. Nonetheless, among the various modes through which presence can be constructed, one of the most influential in both traditional and contemporary actor-training practices is the modality oriented towards the deliberate attraction of the spectator’s attention – what we may call a *seductive* presence. Thus, since this idea of seduction of the spectator in performatic practice, various techniques have been developed on how to actualise such manipulation, on what means to employ for achieving certain (passional, ludic, ideological, etc.) effects. Therefore, the first step should be to expose (*monstrate*) the performer’s own body as an attractive object to look at in order to capture the spectator’s *joint attention*¹³ (“wanting-to-look”). Yet, according to Contreras Lorenzini, it should be more appropriate to speak of “wanting-to-appreciate”, since:

Modalisation is not only accomplished via a willingness to look, but via a broader willingness to polysensory appreciation. If this first modalisation occurs, the second modalisation can also be achieved, which, in this instance, corresponds to *not-being-able-to-not appreciate*. Only this second modalisation allows for the continuity of the intersubjective relationship between performer and spectator [in terms of joint attention] (2008: 165-166, my translation).

Accordingly, one could claim that actors’ task is twofold: on the one hand, they have to perform the programmed action predetermined by the project-script¹⁴ – $NP_1 (S_A \cup O_P) \rightarrow (S_A \cap O_P)$ – and, on the other hand, they have to make the spectators keep modalised according to a “wanting-to-look/appreciate” – $NP_2 (S_A \cup O_S) \rightarrow (S_A \cap O_S)$. While fulfilling these two tasks, which one could define in Greimas’s terms as narrative programmes (NP), actors have to work on their performatic action, which therefore needs to be managed by a *dilated* intention, because it is oriented both towards the stage action and, to some extent, towards the spectator¹⁵.

Barba’s dilated body is also felt and experienced as a plane of intensity or an intensified rite of passage which actively engages both the performer and the spectator qualitatively and affectively. [...] To dilate the body is to help awaken the

¹² The so-called “non-dance movement” (*non-danse*), which developed in France in the mid-1990s, questions the very conditions of choreographic visibility. Artists such as Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Emmanuelle Huynh and Alain Buffard explore forms of presentation based on minimal movement, everyday gesture, textuality and conceptual strategies. Rather than producing a strategic or seductive presence, non-dance cultivates modes of appearing that are understated, anti-virtuosic and often deliberately “neutral” (Ploebst 2001; Lepecki 2006).

¹³ This is the capability of human beings to conjoin their attention with that of another human being on an event or object in space.

¹⁴ This analytical scheme concerns those performance settings in which the actor works through pre-structured actions and intentionally shaped gestural configurations. Improvisation-based practices involve different modalities of interaction and temporal organisation and therefore exceed the scope of this model, which is primarily devised for scripted or semi-scripted forms of performance. It should also be noted that, even in improvisation, the actor does not operate in the absence of structure. As Michele Pedrazzi (2007) observes, improvisers are “prepared for everything” precisely because they are dramaturgically equipped with a set of competences that enable them to select, according to the situation, among several potential enunciative strategies. Such selections are never random but remain coherent with the range of possible narrative programmes embedded in the larger dramaturgical project. Nevertheless, improvisation follows a logic of emergence that differs from the intentionally pre-constructed configurations considered in this model and therefore falls outside the scope of the present analysis.

¹⁵ cf. Sofia 2013a: 48.

body, that of the performer and the spectator alike, to affectivities, sensitivities, and intensities (Su 2011: 112).

Consequently, if an actor on stage has to perform actions that may resemble even more everyday actions, such as, for instance, eating an apple, the aim of each of his or her bites will not be merely related to the object-apple, but above all to the fact that by means of that gesture he or she has to lead and stimulate the attention of the audience that *joins in* with that action. If our aim is to account for this “acting in presence”, then it is pivotal to analyse the performative action not (only) as a result but mainly as a *process*. This perspective aligns with a long-standing view in performance theory, already formulated by Richard Schechner, who described performance as an emergent and continuously unfolding process rather than a fixed product (Schechner 2002). Therefore, while attempting to keep the joint attention for the whole performative event, the actor must employ strategies of constructing this attention, which, however, are not restricted to the gaze-intention relationship, but extend to the entire posture, to the entire *body schema*.

As Shaun Gallagher outlines, the body schema «is a non-conscious performance of the body [...], rather than a copy, image, global model, or conception of the existing parts of the body. This schema, as an operative performance, is the way that the body experiences its environment» (1986: 548). In addition, the body schema partially determines the body image, as well as «habits partially determine conscious decisions» (1986: 550). However, defining the body schema as a non-conscious process does not mean that it is automatic, but rather *pre-reflexive*. That is, it belongs to that territory that features, for example, the control that the piano player has of their fingers whilst performing a piece of music and that would liken musicians to actors, dancers, mimes, acrobats, etc. This pre-reflexive process is closely tied to the directing of the body towards a goal that, as such, is conscious. Yet this pre-reflexive dimension does not imply either fixity or a lack of modulation. As several authors have argued, the body schema can be dynamically recalibrated during gestural execution through forms of second-order embodied observation, allowing performers to adjust their movements in real time. Moreover, the body schema is never an asocial substratum: it is stratified by culturally embedded «techniques of the body» (Mauss 1934) and shaped by the historical and social conditions in which the performer’s corporeality emerges.

Thereby, repetition and experience are grounded in actor’s training, through which, for instance, Gabriele Sofia (2013b) suggests that the actor is able to embody different neuromotor routines which undergo a higher degree of pre-reflexive self-awareness that would lead the actor to an enhancement of his or her body schema – gained through training and stage practice – which Sofia labels the *performative body schema*. Other than representing the enhanced array of knowledge acquired through experience, what is particularly interesting is that Sofia is suggesting that this performative body schema should be regarded as non-linguistic thinking, i.e. a «*thinking in motion*» of which each performer acknowledges in their actions (Sofia 2013b: 30)¹⁶. For, this is a level of *pre-expressive organisation* – to quote Eugenio Barba (1993) – that precedes any act of stage writing.

¹⁶ However, that such *thinking in motion* does not entail a separation between embodiment and linguisticity. As Merleau-Ponty argued, bodily expressivity and linguistic expressivity are intertwined within an original chiasmus: the body “speaks” through its gestures just as language is rooted in the corporeal ground of perception and action. In this sense, the performative body schema can be considered pre-verbal without being extra-linguistic, insofar as its organisation participates in the same expressive dimension that underlies both gestural and linguistic forms.

The pre-expressive appears to us, then, as the dynamic matter circumscribed and worked on by those principles which, in a transcultural dimension, help *bring alive* the precision of a design. Thus, when the design of a movement is organically developed and brought alive, it leads to a leap of meaning (Barba [1993] 1995:134).

Indeed, the pre-expressive one is a preliminary stage that prepares any performer for the creative process of performing through which actors embody the thinking and the rules of the theatre genre to which they have chosen to belong. Here, expressivity is not understood as an a priori quality or as an emotional discharge, but as the organisation of bodily actions along a continuum of tensions, values and perceptual cues through which meaning becomes possible. In this sense, the “pre-expressive” does not refer to a pre-semiotic or natural layer, but to a level of organisation that, following Contreras Lorenzini (2008), can be described as asemantic yet already structured by cultural and technical constraints¹⁷. As far as I am concerned, the processes of artificialisation of the actor’s corporeality – enacted by the various strategies of extra-daily construction of the body – aim to bring attention to the medial role of the body, first articulating its plastic (pre-expressive) level by instituting tensions, oppositions and combinations of dynamics, and then structuring the expressive (figurative) level and thus giving a *mimetic* form to the performer’s body according to a tenet of *meaning iconism*. From a semiotic perspective, the “plastic” level refers to the organisation of the body’s perceptual materiality according to tensional, kinetic and positional properties, following the plastic categories identified in Greimas’s visual semiotics and later extended to corporeal dynamics (Fontanille 2004). In this sense, “expressive” does not coincide exclusively with the figurative level in general semiotics, but here designates the moment in which these plastic configurations become stabilised into recognisable gestural forms. Likewise, the “iconism” at stake is not a naive principle of resemblance, but a process of meaning production based on structural analogies between the performer’s plastic organisation and the perceptual patterns that spectators can identify as mimetic or gesturally motivated.

Hence, one may suppose that training has the function of providing the actor-performer with the competence to (know-how-to) *write meaning* on stage through his or her corporeality, a knowledge that different theatre cultures shape in different ways, thus defining their own conditions of presence. After all, as Lorenzo Mango (2003) states, the pre-expressive level is the one that allows the *transformation* of the actor’s stage presence from pure phenomenal fact into writing, conceived as the conscious (intentional and compositional)¹⁸ arrangement of a series of meaningful actions, movements and behaviours that jointly produce a performatic discourse. It should be emphasised that “writing” in this context does not presuppose the existence of a dramatic text nor a verbal structure. Scenic and choreographic writing can emerge from purely corporeal, kinetic or spatial configurations, and the competence at stake concerns

¹⁷ Pre-expressive should not be meant as pre-semiotic, since the performer’s body is already semiotised by the discourses and the practices that have instituted it as apparatus. In this regard, Contreras Lorenzini suggests that what Barba is referring to as pre-expressive could be semiotically conceptualised as an asemantic level of action. If the action is observed by someone then the action clearly gets a meaning by that someone. If, on the other hand, the action is not perceived by anyone except the actor, then it becomes an action without precise meaning but nevertheless pervaded by tensions and values (cf. Contreras Lorenzini 2008: 173).

¹⁸ In linguistics, *compositionality* refers to the tenet that the meaning of a complex expression (such as a sentence) is determined by the meanings of its parts and the way these are combined. *Intentionality*, on the other hand, refers to the orientation or pertinence of mental states and linguistic utterances as having to do with something. Although apparently quite distinct, the two aspects are intertwined in terms of how we understand and create meaning in language. For further reference see Campisi (2018).

the actor-performer's ability to organise these materials into a coherent discursive arrangement, independently of any pre-given verbal dramaturgy. This means recognising a competence owned by the actor-performer in knowing-how-to put into discourse a *stage language*, that is autonomous and independent with respect to a pre-existing dramatic sense stored in a previous dramatic text. A competence first stored in the body, a performatic knowledge, "in action"¹⁹.

As such, the actor's duty is not to perform something that already exists by merely translating it into gestures and actions. Rather, what is occurring is an operation of *transduction*²⁰ closer to a *creative act of writing*. The actor transduces, with his or her own means, skills and objectives, the possible dramatic world, virtualised in a performatic project, into the *hic et nunc* world of the stage. What is at stake, therefore, is not a referential correspondence between the prearranged project and its material enactment, but rather a translation between different sign systems. There is not one dramatic reality but quite a few realities with a different degree of existence. Within the framework of Greimas's theory of modalities – according to which there is a virtual level, an actual level, a realised level of existence – one might, to some extent, compare performatic practice to a culinary practice: the design of a dish, the recipe, would have a virtual existence; the finished and served dish would have an actual existence; the dish eaten by the diners, a realised existence. Dramatic reality, therefore, could be much more complex and articulated to analyse, being something that can be disassembled, deconstructed, analysed in its different modes of existence. Thus, one might conceive the performatic event virtualised in a prearranged project, actualised in the body of the actor-performer and realised in the materiality of the performance.

2. The mediality of the actor's body

As Vittorio Gallese (2007) points out, the relationship between spectator and actor is never one of passive observing, but of active participating in the actions performed by the actors. After all, sight stands for a form of contact, and this contact takes place precisely on account of the actor's body becoming the medium of aesthetic experience. Ever since ancient Greek theatre, for example, the actor was considered a medium. As a matter of fact, the *hypokritês* was the one who interprets a clue and, as a medium, the one capable of translating signs, and the one who materialises words by giving them a body (cf. Allegri 2017). Similarly, Helmuth Plessner (1948), in his essay *On the Anthropology of the Actor*, argues that the actor's bodily and gestural means – such as the means of line and colour for the painter – must be inscribed within the horizon of an expressive limit, aimed at the composition of what Plessner terms the «figure», i.e. the production of the image to be portrayed by the actor to the spectator. Spectators relate the actor's expressive power to the intensity with which the expressive image matches their feeling, but they do not forget that behind this figure – even if one were to aspire to immediate naturalness – there is no feeling, but the plastic distance of the actor who identifies with a character in a certain situation. Even the film actor plays a role, even the film actor is still a representative, is still the vehicle of a mask.

Accordingly, the actor's body can be regarded as a writing surface on which the various theatre cultures accomplish acts of writing. To offer their corporeality to these operations of putting-in-shape, however, actors must first disembody their self-persona, i.e. their idiosyncratic identity, in order to allow their performing-persona to take its

¹⁹ For, as Deriu also points out, «performative behaviour is [...] a "knowledge of the body in action", of the acting body» (Deriu 2012: 98*n*, my translation).

²⁰ cf. Fabbri (1998).

place. Such a performing-persona has been “neutralised” by acting techniques, namely made into a blank page ready to be overwritten by the content hosting the performance, content to which performers offer themselves, via their own body, as a decoding means (that is a *medium*) for those who are watching and partaking in their performative action. In appearing their behaviour and actions to the spectators, actors allow spectators to attune themselves to the possible dramatic world mainly by means of their own bodies.

Conceiving the body as a medium, actors are supposed to know-how/be-able to fulfil an operation of engagement [*embrayage*] in order to disembody themselves and thus observe their phenomenal living body as if through a mirror, thus doubling themselves into two actants. Hence, one could argue that acting techniques mostly entail training performers to achieve a “disembodied awareness” of their semiotic body in action. In fact, performers are subjects endowed with a body that is involved in the theatrical phenomenon precisely by means of their phenomenal presence in the world. Every embodiment thus implies a de-embodiment (Beato 2024: 112-113, my translation).

Therefore, one can assume that the actor’s doing might be regulated by an enunciation mechanism based on what Bruno Latour (2012; 2017) terms a “technical enunciation”: technical doing is preliminary to any meaningful production²¹. Within the actor’s performance, the body is the matter, i.e. the technically manipulated *clay* that is able to produce figures, and capable of resonating with spectators and of constructing a meaningful connection with them. We all use our bodies as a means to generate inner images or to receive outer images, so the mediality of the image becomes an expression of bodily experience. The materiality of the actor-performer’s body is what interacts directly with the spectator’s body, infecting it and placing it in a corresponding state of excitability. In other words, this is what Erika Fischer-Lichte (2004) defines as the transformative power of performance (*Die verwandelnde Kraft von Aufführungen*), i.e. that property of the performatic event to transform the spectator through the very experience of partaking.

When Aristotle described the effect of tragic theatre in his *Poetics* as the excitement of ἔλεος (*eleos*) and φόβος (*phobos*), pity and terror, he was aiming at an exceptional affective state which is brought about in and through performance, articulated physically and able to alter the person concerned. Catharsis, the term he introduced to define the goal of tragic theatre, cannot negate its ritual origins and its idea of purging evokes healing rituals (Fischer-Lichte [2004] 2008: 191).

This is a process of thymic-emotional *contagion* which, as a result of perception, conveys the feelings perceived in the actor’s body to the spectator and thus makes the pathemic effect of the performance achievable. As several scholars have noted, such a form of contagion can be understood as a regime of interaction based on sensorial and affective contiguity, in line with Eric Landowski’s model of «interaction by contagion» (Landowski 1997; 2004). According to Fischer-Lichte, this «emotional infection» (2008: 192) is the reason why performatic events fully exert their transformative – and thus

²¹ We shall explore this stance further in the next paragraph since, with respect to what Latour suggests, the performer’s body as a figure is not completely delegated to present an absence, as in the example of the basket and the weaver. However, we are going to illustrate the extent to which, in one respect, such a comparison can still be theoretically conceivable.

political – power, namely their capability to provoke changes in individuals²². After all, it is not by chance that since Tertullian (2nd-3rd century A.D.) any spectacular form, any performative phenomenon – primarily addressed to the sense of sight – regardless of its genre, or its fictional or actual status, has been constantly stigmatised according to several criteria, all of which share the belief that the performing event is a behaviour that identifies performer and spectator in sharing the same experience²³. Furthermore, in Vittorio Gallese’s perspective, the body in action would be the pivot around which the *intentional attunement* characterizing the intrinsic reciprocity of all interindividual practices, even performatic ones, occurs.

In the theatrical experience there is, indeed, a multiplicity of mimetic-simulating relationships that, on the one hand, connect creator and beneficiary via the mediation of the actor’s playing, and, on the other, transform each spectator into a member of a new social group, the audience. Within all these sorts of interpersonal relationships, phenomena of mimetic identification occur, [through] numerous features of the intersubjective relationship, such as actions, intentions, mimic-like behaviour, emotions, feelings and language. Gestures, emotions, perceptions and words stem their shared meaning from their common root in the body in action, the main leading actor and creator of theatrical expression (Gallese 2010: 252, my translation).

What emerges, then, is a mode of “mapping” the other that engenders an intentional attunement, which underlies that typical phenomenal quality that all of us experience, whilst sharing a relationship of identity and reciprocity with the other. This is how the actor-spectator relationship, by attuning via the bodily medium, becomes a relationship to be played out precisely at the intercorporeal level. At first, to look means to partake with one’s whole body, to be involved in person. What is at play between actor and spectator is an intercorporeal system, since spectators, as well as actors, are endowed with a body with which they partake in the performative experience. Bringing attention back to the intersubjective and intercorporeal dimension at stake in theatre practices thus allows, moreover, for the overcoming of what Luciano Mariti labels the “dogma of immaculate perception”, «that is, of the body meant as an object and not as a body that is both explored and exploring» (2010: 23, my translation). Indeed, the spectator’s perception has always been addressed as an effect symmetrically (and automatically) triggered by the actor’s expressivity, and not, above all, as the dialectical pole of a complex live processual interrelationship as it is. Perception can only be a *constructive act* in which spectators *produce* their own perceptions and do not merely detect them. Their body connects with the possible dramatic world, inhabiting it. What one is dealing with here is not just an “visual” matter, but a proper synesthetic *collusion*, a “being-with”²⁴.

3. Enunciation and Corporeality

As we move away from verbal language and broaden the notion of enunciation to encompass performatic practices as well, the extent to which the body necessarily plays a key role in this discussion immediately arises. As Contreras Lorenzini emphasises, the

²² For example, that was the reason why Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), openly condemned theatre due to its capability to bring about transformations that threaten the identity of the spectator.

²³ cf. Carloti (2014).

²⁴ This «being-with» can be described, following Fischer-Lichte (2004), as a form of body listening: a perceptual modality in which spectators attune to the performance through their own corporeality, engaging in a kinaesthetic and affective responsiveness that exceeds visual reception.

introduction of corporeality into the theory of enunciation entails assigning two functions to the body, that of making meaning *apparatus* and that of enabling communicating *interface*. To regard the body as both apparatus and interface of signification consequently focuses on the actor's identity. As remarked by Vsevolod Meyerhold (Pitches, Aquilina 2023), in fact, relying on one's own phenomenal body entails for the actor the issue of the convergence between the *artist* and the *matter* of his or her creation, a matter, moreover, that is already culturally shaped on which it is essential to intervene in order to (over)write not only the body of the character, but first of all the performer's own body, which, as such, must be able to be distinguished from an "everyday" body, that is, to be *dissimilar*²⁵ to it.

When examining the issue in terms of enunciation, one could claim to be dealing with a sort of technical enunciation – quoting Bruno Latour (2017) and his example of the basket-weaver. However, the semiotic challenge lies in the extent to which actors, while performing a disengagement (*débrayage*) in a body dissimilar than their everyday one, do not completely absent themselves, but rather *overshadow* their self-persona. To emphasise this actantial disengagement²⁶, therefore, they must learn to discipline their own body, which is thus conceived as a quasi-object that is not yet a sign.

Qu'est-ce qu'un quasi-objet? Ce n'est pas – ce n'est pas d'abord – un signe. C'est le *déplacement* de l'énonciateur dans un autre corps, *dissemblable*, qui tient en place, même lorsque l'énonciateur se retire et d'*absente*, et qui s'adresse à l'énonciataire qu'il tient en place. Telle est la caractéristique principale de l'énonciation technique (Latour 2017: 32).

Thus, the bodily expressive plan, with its gestural and physical configurations on both the plastic and the figurative level, necessarily becomes the focus of "disciplining" (*inculturation/acculturation*)²⁷ insofar as it is deemed an autonomous writing medium with respect to verbal language. Not only words, but the entire body becomes utterance through which actors are able to express themselves. As a conclusion, a semantic relevance is therefore assigned to the bodily gestural dimension to such an extent as to allow us to conceive of an all-embracing expressivity of both body and movement as the result of a proper writing process such as to acquire its own expressive value. This means conceiving corporeality from being a mere phenomenal fact to being a writing fact, that is, to being an articulation of signs consciously managed by one. The aim of the various theatre cultures, then, would be to establish a *grammar* of the actor by first constructing a pre-referential²⁸ expressive level made up of *pure* signs, i.e. not yet addressed to a meaning. Hence, in most 20th century research on the actor's corporeality, one encounters a full-blown obsession with form (De Marinis 2000; Helbo 2006; Pavis 1996). Indeed, the actor's body is required to be a *body of difference* in order to avoid – quoting, for example, Étienne Decroux's comments (1963) – being reduced to the mere presentation of itself. Consequently, a *counterfeiting* of the body is essential, namely a de-formation of the body into a fictional, extra-daily, other-than-self (that is, dissimilar) one able to depict new forms of expression. Such procedures of corporeal re-

²⁵ «Theatre is an art, and it follows that everything should be subject to the laws of this art. The laws of life and the laws of art differ» (in "Vsevolod Meyerhold's Class. Stage Movement Technique" in Pitches, Aquilina 2023: 228).

²⁶ That will consist in disjuncting a "not-I" from them as the subject of the enunciation.

²⁷ Barba, Savarese 1991: 189.

²⁸ Or a pre-expressive level, in Eugenio Barba's terms.

writing²⁹ are due to the fact that in the performing act a sort of tension is constantly emerging between the performer's phenomenal body and its being other-than-self, whether it is a *dramatis persona*, i.e. a character (representation), or simply a performatic body in a performative frame (presentation). In fact, the moment the actor appears, spectators are already receiving, on a visual level, many perceptual stimuli that enable them to infer a range of content for their comprehension (and apprehension) of the dramatic narrative. After all, as Erika Fischer-Lichte states, «the actor's appearance quite obviously functions as a system that generates meaning» ([1983] 1992: 64).

Under this perspective, one might suppose, therefore, that the actor's performance – that is, the range of all the bodily behaviours that we can refer to his or her performatic action – implies a certain enunciation mechanism. As such, the crucial point is to conceive of the actor's performance in terms of enunciation and to attempt to enlighten the specific mode of functioning of the enunciating body within the performative frame. The issue of enunciation in theatre practice is also addressed by Umberto Eco (1977), for instance. He pinpoints the presence of two speech acts performed by the actor: (i) a first implicit performative statement that can be resumed in the formula «*I am acting*»³⁰, that is an implicit assertion – or rather a *monstrated monstration*³¹ – with which the actor “says” the truth at the very moment in which s/he announces that from now on s/he will lie; (ii) a series of more explicit statements that instead allow for access to the possible dramatic world, insofar as they are encompassed in the fictional sphere.

Monstration is beginning to take hold as a way to describe and identify this mode of communicating a story, which consists of *showing* characters (in English, monstrance) who *act out* rather than *tell* the vicissitudes to which they are subjected. Monstration could thus be used to replace the term ‘representation,’ which is too specific, too compromised, and far too polysemic (Gaudreault [1988] 2009: 69).

As such, the actor performs transductive choices through *acts of monstration*, thus producing utterances that are embodied in gestures, actions, etc., in order to project content at the visual level. Hence, to monstrate as “to make something visually perceptible”. But, above all, to monstrate as “to give *something* visual form”. According to Phillip Zarrilli (2009: 41), for example, any theatre culture draws up its theory of acting assigning its proper and fluctuating values to the actor's corporeality, as well as instituting its own organising system of vision on which the actor-spectator relationship is then founded and articulated. The common trait of all theatre culture thus seems to be the “nurturing” of the expressive form, i.e. of the figure with which the actor appears (*monstrates*) to the spectator. In fact, the performatic behaviours displayed by the actor in the performative frame are always addressed to the spectators with the aim of being as effective as possible in order to attune them to the performance, especially at the intercorporeal level. Accordingly, gestures, in terms of bodily configurations afforded to the spectator's apperception, play a crucial role in both the processes of production and reception of meaning.

²⁹ Let us refer to *re-writing* because, as Ugo Volli states, the human body is *already* written. «It is the first and most fundamental writing medium of the human world. We constantly mark on it the traces that allow us to organise its relationship with other bodies, with non-human nature, with society. Each modification of the body, each care of it, and of course clothing too, works on these traces and modifies them» (1998: 9, my translation).

³⁰ In other words, here is a grounding enunciation declaring the play, the convention, to be theatrical.

³¹ *Enunciated enunciation* occurs in a text in those cases where the subject of the enunciation is explicitly referred to, e.g. by a first-person pronoun, asserting “I”. Accordingly, in a theory of monstration in which the subject does not assert but rather “appears” (*monstrates*), we might rather refer to a *monstrated monstration*.

4. Final remarks

Semiotics has traditionally grounded the analysis of gestures and bodily dimension on a supposed opposition between behavioural phenomena – conceived as pre-semiotic – and communicative phenomena – conceived as semiotic³². For example, in the Italian introduction to *Approaches to semiotics* (1964), Umberto Eco and Paolo Fabbri define kinesics as the «universe of bodily postures, of gestural behaviours, of facial expressions, of all those phenomena that lie somewhere between behavioural and communicative acts» (Sebeok et al. [1964] 1970: 5, my translation). Nevertheless, such a definition relies on a conception of corporeality founded on an underlying tension between bodily “automatisms” (deemed meaningless) and bodily dynamics used to communicate (deemed meaningful and signified). Yet, as Stano (2019) remarks, the material bodily entity should never be regarded as unrelated to cultural dynamics. The body cannot be conceived of as a “natural” – unculturised – one even though some ages and cultures have often emphasised this supposed biological assumption (cf. Stano 2023). When we face a body, we deceive ourselves as dealing with a transparent and self-evident object, by being totally unaware of the body is always the outcome of a complex cultural negotiation, instead. Even more so in performatic practices, a place of semiotisation par excellence. Indeed, according to Umberto Eco (1985), the theatrical sign is a fictional sign, not because it is fake or because it communicates unexisting things, but because it *pretends not to be a sign*. For instance, the mere presence of objects on the stage endows them with a signifying function, and as such symbolic: they are involved in the performance while in real life their function would be purely utilitarian. Consequently, the actor’s body once appeared is no longer “a thing among things”, because it is cut out of the context of real events and “monstrated”, that is, *put-into-vision* within a performative frame.

Hence, that of the actor is a “restored behaviour”³³ conceived as something distant, separate, from its performer-enunciator, i.e. something on which one can materially act and rework, which is why I argue that it is conceivable – in Latour’s perspective – to address such behaviours as *tokens in motion* from the bodies that make them move.

Restored behavior is ‘out there,’ separate from ‘me.’ To put in personal terms, restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned.’ Even if I feel myself wholly to be myself, acting independently, only a little investigating reveals that the units of behavior that comprise ‘me’ were not invented by ‘me’ (Schechner [2002] 2013: 34-5).

However, in such a technical “transfer-passage” (*passé*), the enunciator made the deviation is overshadowed, not completely absent, and the restored body, as a placeholder, takes its place being, though, dissimilar only in form but not in substance (cf. Latour 2017). The restored behaviour can be worn like a mask or a costume. Its form can be seen from the outside, and it can be changed. According to Richard Schechner, human behaviour is always repeated, recovered, i.e. based on the unique and unrepeatable execution of pre-existing, more or less strongly encoded patterns. Therefore, performatic behaviour is also no exception. For this reason, the analysis of the actor’s figure is semiotically decisive in understanding the overall performance. Indeed, the figure, as well as revealing within itself the traces of the theatre culture that conceived it, can also reveal a lot about the actor-spectator relationship on which it is arranged. Since «each body exposes itself to the world as a (individual and, inevitably,

³² On early semiotic approaches to gestural behaviour, see also the monographic issue *Pratiques et langages gestuel* in *Langages* no. 10 (1968) which offered one of the first semiotic treatments of gesture.

³³ For a further discussion of restored behaviour and *mimesis* see Deriu (2022).

socio-cultural) project» (Stano 2019: 156, my translation), the same can be said about a performatic body.

Through their performing, actors do not “narrate” *something*, but rather “monstrate” it via their figure, that is their *appearance level*³⁴. Moreover, this act of monstration is never a purely ostensive act, since in appearing, actors – besides being embedded in a frame of enunciation that semiotizes them according to an enunciation contract, whereby conventionally their performing and appearing are meaningful – do intentionally employ semiotic strategies of manipulating their corporeality. Such monstration involves not only iconic configurations of the body, but also indexical cues: the performer’s corporeal presence, its traces, orientations and gestures function as indices that anchor perception to the here-and-now of the event. The efficacy of monstration therefore relies on a continuous back-and-forth between iconism and indexicality, whose interplay grounds both the recognisability and the affective impact of the actor’s actions. Accordingly, my standpoint is that the concept of monstration is particularly effective in the analysis of actors’ performance insofar as it contributes to emphasising the extent to which the dramatic narrative as a whole is entrusted above all to actions, movements, and *corporeal shapes*³⁵. Words, meant as verbal expressive substance, undoubtedly have an equally significant importance when interpreting performance, but they are only one of the many expressive modes to which narrative is delegated. As a matter of fact, one must abandon the logocentric perspective that has conditioned (and dominated) a great deal of the theatre studies – not only of semiotic background – according to which the meaning of a theatre piece or an actor’s performance was to be found exclusively in the verbal dimension linked to the written text. On the contrary, meaning is the product of a more complex synaesthetic apperception that is mainly triggered by bodies and by the images they produce in the ecology of the performatic experience.

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³⁴ cf. Fischer-Lichte (1983).

³⁵ For further insight into the role of corporeal shapes in the actors training stage, see, e.g., Anne Bogart’s research (2004).

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