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Abstract: “Situated and Social: A (Re)Consideration of Terminology for Actors”

This paper considers possible applications of research in select areas of cognitive science to acting and actor training.

Cognitive science research, particularly in areas such as situated cognition and social neuroscience, is increasingly complicating our sense of what it means to be a “self” or an “individual,” and to challenge typical western (and perhaps most specifically American) views of autonomy and independence. The research encourages us to think of the boundaries and agency of a “self” or “individual” in terms that are simultaneously more contingent, dynamic, and constrained. This nuanced understanding of a self that cannot be separated from its material conditions (or, to use the terms from situated cognition, a self that is embodied in the individual’s body, embedded in the physical environment in which it functions, and extended into the minds of the other individuals it encounters) is useful in finding – or at least refining – effective vocabularies for working with and teaching actors.

Many, if not most, traditional western approaches to actor training focus on the individual actor. This is understandable and no doubt necessary, but it is just part of the actor’s work. A decontextualized, or insufficiently contextualized, approach to a character typically results in actors not taking into account the environment in which their character will “live” sufficiently. Drawing on the science, I hypothesize possible applications for working with actors, particularly addressing ways of engaging actors with the constellation of elements in their and their character’s environments, as well as “interior life.” I focus on traditional western acting vocabulary terms and how these inhibit the actor’s efficacy; based on insights from social neuroscience, situated cognition, and cognitive linguistics, I will discuss how the actor’s vocabulary might be refined or shifted to allow her a more dynamic and specific engagement with the role and rehearsal process. This builds on my past work in applying cognitive science in the acting studio and rehearsal process, to take the next step in thinking about how the relationships among language, understanding, imagination, and action work for the actor.