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Journal Aim and Scope

The Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL) is a biannual research publication issued by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The journal seeks to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work in the fields of visual and performing arts, while also promoting multidisciplinary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. JOVPA-SL welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioner-researchers engaged in arts-based research, fostering critical dialogue and innovative perspectives on creative practice and inquiry. It serves as a platform for critical engagement, experimental methodologies, and creative pedagogy, addressing themes that are either discipline-specific such as dance, drama, performance studies, music, or visual arts or situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. The journal invites original, rigorous, and meaningful research in creative arts and performance studies, both within and across academic boundaries. It encourages critical debate and cross-disciplinary exchange through diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to: theatre studies, performance studies, dance studies, ethnomusicology, music education, popular culture, dance and movement analysis, art history, art theory, visual and cultural studies, crafts, digital arts and design, film studies, and fine arts.

Cover Photo: Final Year Dance Production, 'Oracle' performed in 2018 at Panibharatha Theatre. Dept. of Theatre, and Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance.

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**Body as a Conscious Linguistic Signifier:
The Primacy of Body Consciousness in
Performance**

ABSTRACT

Through the encoding of the film on the part of the film maker and the decoding of the film language on the part of the film viewer, the film making and viewing process can be identified as taking place through two points of consciousness. This process of encoding and decoding can be studied more clearly through semiotics. The digitalized body of the film actor is a moving semiotic signifier. It is the role of the film actor to be aware of this owing to the fact that it is their body that is the semiotic signifier. The body/signifier captured on film faces a greater challenge than the body/signifier captured through the photograph since the filmic medium incorporates time and movement into its narration. Through Barthes' understanding that language takes place through absence just as much as presence, we see that the semiotic signifier that is the body of the actor is tasked with being 'readable' to the film viewer in a way that the consciousness of the film maker is communicated in an effective manner. This demands that the film actor is aware of their body as not a body of the self. The film actor must become a conscious semiotic signifier. The development of body awareness takes place through the development of repeated physical movement and the creation of muscle memory which creates the bodymind.

KEYWORDS:

Film, Acting,
Performance,
Consciousness,
Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Film is a digital medium, while theatre is live performance. In contrasting the two forms, Susan Sontag sees Film as an “object” and Theatre as “performance” (Sontag, 1966). As an object in the digital form catering to the auditory and visual senses of the viewer, film provides incredible detail and realism in to the auditory and visual senses of the viewer. The film viewer is immersed in the film with very little opportunity to contest the illusion of reality that they are immersed in (Metz, 1974). Film enters the consciousness of the viewer and transports them to a different reality, an experience both different and similar to the real that they are located in. The film maker is in control of the reality that the film viewer is taken to, but not entirely.

Sontag identifies all Art as a “fact of consciousness” (Sontag, 1966) and through this we know that there are two consciousnesses involved in the Film process. That of the film maker, and that of the film viewer. Given its digital form, there is absolute codification of consciousness through the communication that is the filmic medium. It is through this understanding that we come to the discussion of film as a language. The language that is film is then ‘decoded’ in the consciousness of the film viewer, which makes it a communication. This paper discusses this codification through the actor’s body and a study of semiotics and simulation, bringing us to a discussion of the role of the actor in the film making process.

FILM AS A LANGUAGE

The communication between film maker and film viewer takes place through the digitalization and composition of objects through the camera. Since the camera captures objectively, the body of the actor is objectified in the process of digitalization. Film is the objective scrutiny of not only space and matter, but also time (Benjamin, 1935). Christian Metz begins his identification of film as a language through the discussion of motion.

Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual

participation in the spectator (one is almost never totally bored by a movie). They spontaneously appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more intensely than do the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that "It is so." With ease they make the kind of statements a linguist would call fully assertive and which, moreover, are usually taken at face value. (Metz, 1974, p. 4)

The film viewer is 'drawn in' to how convincing the work is, to the extent that the real is replaced with the realistic. Through film we experience not just digitalization of picture and sound, but also digitalization of time. A past and present, a then and a now, making film a chronological art form.

The process of editing through a carefully selected sequence of events arranged in a selective order and the portrayal of space relatively gives the film maker the freedom to deliver a highly detailed narrative. This narrative, though assuming the illusion of reality, is highly manipulated. The narrative includes everything that the film maker wishes to communicate, and (more importantly) exclude everything they wish not to communicate. Furthermore, there is a distinct beginning, middle, and end of a film, and this beginning, middle and end is determined by the maker of the film during the process of production and also during the process of post-production.

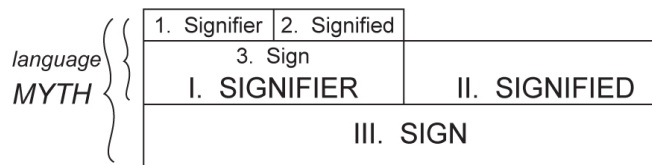
The spectator perceives images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (their order could have been different). In a sense, he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some "master of ceremonies," some "grand image-maker" (grand imagier) who (before being recognized as the author, if it is an auteur film, or, if not, in the absence of an author) is first and foremost the film itself as a linguistic object (since the spectator always knows that what he is seeing is a film), or more precisely a sort of "potential

linguistic focus" ("foyer linguistique virtuel") situated somewhere behind the film, and representing the basis that makes the film possible. (Metz, 1974, p. 21)

The construction of the narrative through inclusion and exclusion is a deliberate and conscious speech act of the film maker. The artist intentionally creates the presence of a certain narrative, and in turn is intentional in creating absence as well. The spectator is then drawn into an ultra-realistic narrative structure that works through both presence and absence.

SEMIOTICS IN THE FILM-LANGUAGE

The body of the actor is captured, digitalized and turned into semiotic signifiers in this film making process. Unlike in theatre where the actor is live and can never be dissociated from the time and space within which they are performing, the film actor is detached from reality through the objectification of the camera. The body of the film actor is a semiotic signifier.



(Barthes, 1991, p.113)

Roland Barthes discusses speech as a system of signification; a composition of a series of signs through which meaning is created through absence as well as presence. The understanding of the absence through the presence is the process of signification; the understanding of the myth.

But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of significa-

tion, a form. (Barthes, 1991, p. 107)

In the creation of the myth, what we must recall is that the process of signification at the point of codification fills the signifier with meaning, and at the point of the de-codification in the listener (film viewer), the signifier becomes empty, void of meaning. The body of the actor is then filled with meaning at the point of performance, but in the creation of the character in the mind of the film viewer, the body of the actor is no longer “the body of the actor” but rather the character in its entirety. Hence, there is demand for absence in the body of the actor. Sontag discusses this as there being no distinction between the actor and the character in the film. This way, the character is completely empty of the actor. “As the film actor and his role are identical, so the image cannot be dissociated from what is imaged” (Sontag, 1966, p. 29). The character takes priority over the actor through the emptying of the signifier. The actor is both empty of the self, and full of the character. The body of the actor becomes a sign which the film viewer decodes while engaging in the film language. The actor then is present, but empty (absent).

I shall not exceed the limits of an objective analysis if I point out that the ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the alibi (which is, as one realizes, a spatial term): in the alibi too, there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity ('I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not').” (Barthes, 1991, p. 122)

The creation of the myth that is the character (and/or the film, and/or the point of consciousness form which the work of art originates) is through the signifier (the body of the actor) transitioning into the character (the signified). Through the union of the signifier and the signified (or the emptying of the signifier) meaning is formed in the mind of the film viewer through their consciousness. For the film viewer to decode the body of the film actor at their point of consciousness, the film actor must be absent from the body.

In contrasting film and theatre, the process of distinction between

actor and character takes place to a lesser degree in the body of the stage actor since the performance is a live one. The audience member is present at the moment of the creation of performance, and thereby the body of the stage actor is detached from objects that it is located amongst. The theatregoer enjoys the performance of a live actor engaging with props and other actors on a stage while the film viewer engages with a narrative of objects located among objects. This is how the creation of the myth behind the film language differs from the creation of myth in theatre, the expression of the point of consciousness. The objective digitalization of the body of the actor in film activates two points of consciousness for meaning to take place – the point where the body is encoded by the film maker, and the point where the body is decoded by the film viewer.

To further define the body of the actor in the filmic medium – the body of the actor in a moving picture differs from the body of the actor in a still photograph. The body-signifier captured in a still photograph is ‘more absent’ since the frame is a frozen one. The body of the film actor is a moving signifier that also demands absence due to objectification. Given the digital nature of film, the body of the film actor must still be ‘readable’ through absence. The moving body of the film must be aware of this. The decision on the part of the actor on what movement to make is simultaneously a decision on what movement not to make. Movement becomes a highly selective process. The role of the actor is to be conscious of the deliberate decisions that build the language of the film.

THE BODY OF THE ACTOR AS A CONSCIOUS LINGUISTIC SIGNIFIER

The codified body of the actor is activated at the point of it entering the consciousness of the film viewer, where it is ‘read’. This body must give a specific readable narrative to the viewer/reader through its emptiness or absence. For the purpose of this exploration. The readability of the body of the actor takes place through the stillness of the body of the actor. Liyanage discusses this concept through the development of the bodymind – a consciousness located in the body. It is understood as the “pre-expressivity of the actor”

(Liyanage, 2016, p. 62). It is crucial that the actor is able to contain, control, maintain and project one's bodymind in order to manipulate the semiotic signifier that is their body. To be successfully present of the character (what is said) and to be absent of the actor (what is not said) is the achievement of stillness. This consciousness is the bodymind. The understanding of acting as a viewed performance is highlighted through Liyanage's discussion of forms of stillness. The stillness for the actor varies from the stillness of the yogi; the primary contrast being that the stillness of the yogi is not one experienced by a third party.

It should be noted that the seated yogi's stillness of the body and the actor's presence cultivated through the assiduous practice of martial arts such as Angampora are two distinctive approaches of somatic training. A yogi's intention is to achieve mindfulness through meditation and attain *nibbhana* or blissfulness. Yet, the actor's intention is to cultivate her bodymind apparatuses to be effectively used in performance situations. Effective in the sense that the actor should be able to cultivate the habitual body that is thematized and operated as a backdrop of her/his enactment. (Liyanage, 2021, p. 24)

Exploring the communication of thought and emotion through the body of the actor to the viewer is a study of embodiment. The development of an acting technique with embodiment as most important requires a study of training methods that rely on embodiment through repeated physical movement. Phillip B. Zarrilli brings to the forefront the importance of developing a bodymind awareness of the actor's self. Discussing his experiences with Indian Kathakali dance and *Kalari Payattu* martial arts, Zarrilli highlights his development of mindfulness, stillness and tranquility, heightened self-awareness through bodymind trainings.

Gradually, after years of practice, the relationship of my body and mind in practice and my understanding of that relationship began to alter. When demonstrat-

ing the martial art or when acting, I found myself able more consistently to enter a state of readiness and awareness [...] My tensions and inattentions gradually gave way to sensing myself simultaneously as “flowing” yet “power-full”, “centered” yet “free”, “released” yet “controlled.” I was beginning to actualize what Benedetti described as a “stillness in my center.” I was learning how to “stand still. (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 183).

The engagements in Angampora and Kalari highlights the role that repeated physical movement (the development of muscle memory) plays in the development of the awareness of the bodymind. Through the development of the bodymind, the actor is conscious of the image that they body is at the point of performance. An image which is manipulatable through the bodymind; leading to highly detailed consciousness of movement, developing extreme precision in pace, position and posture. It is a conscious image. This argument brings together the understanding of readability of the film actor, and the importance of actor training to go in the direction of body consciousness and the development of the bodymind. In a Lankan setting, developing actor training for the filmic medium brings us to Angam Mechanics.

Angam Mechanics is an actor training methodology that relies on Lankan martial art systems to develop a body-conscious actor. It links Angampora training systems with the actor training methods of Stanislavsky and Meisner to create a body movement system that touches on the techniques of popular actor training methodologies. The AHEAD DOR HEMS no.73 project *A Lamp in a Windless Place*, through Angampora training, develops a system of body movements that heighten consciousness of the body. This allows the actor to go further in the direction of image control and projection in order to deliver a more precise performance, closer in tune to the point of consciousness where the film is being digitalized. The body of the actor aims to be an emptier canvas at the first point of consciousness (the making of the film), and a more readable semiotic signifier at the second point of consciousness (the viewing of the film).

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