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Performing Emotions: A Phenomenological Reflection on Screen Acting[1]

Abstract

The question of emotion in the actor's art has remained one of the most contested issues in Western acting theory since Denis Diderot's seminal Paradoxe sur le comédien (The Paradox of Acting). Diderot famously argues that, in order to move the audience, the actor should not herself be moved by emotion. In response to this proposition, William Archer, in Masks or Faces, advances an opposing position, arguing that the actor genuinely experiences emotion in the process of acting. A similar emphasis on the psychological experience of emotion can be found in the American Method acting tradition, particularly through the influence of Stanislavski's early psychological approach to acting and the technique of emotional memory. Moving beyond this binary opposition between emotional detachment and psychological identification, this paper explores the bodily rootedness of human perception, affect, and action. It argues that emotions in acting are not necessarily generated within the actor's mind as an isolated psychological phenomenon; rather, they emerge through the actor's embodied, situated, and psychophysical engagement with the world. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives, the paper proposes that the actor's emotional experience is ignited through a bodily being-in-the-midst-of experience, in which body, consciousness, environment, imagination, and circumstance become dynamically entangled. The paper develops this argument through autobiographical reflections on my own experience of performing the character of Silindu in the television series Beddegama (Village in the Jungle), based on Leonard Woolf's novel. Through phenomenological descriptions of my own experience of performing Silindu for the screen, this paper challenges the assumption that the convincing portrayal of emotion is primarily a psychological achievement. Instead, it argues that screen emotion emerges from the actor's psychophysical engagement with the given circumstances. The actor's emotional experience is therefore not simply something that exists within the mind and is subsequently expressed through the body. Rather, emotion emerges relationally through the dynamic coupling of the actor's body mind, environment, imagination, sensory perception, and given situation.

Keywords: Screen Acting, Embodied Emotion, Phenomenology, being-in-the-midst-of experience

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Introduction

The question of emotion in the actor's art has remained one of the most contested issues in Western acting theory since Denis Diderot's seminal essay, "*Paradoxe sur le comédien*" (*The Paradox of Acting*). Diderot famously argues that, in order to move an audience, an actor need not be emotionally moved (Diderot et al., 2015). In response, William Archer, in "*Masks or Faces*", advances an opposing position, arguing that actors genuinely experience emotions in the process of acting (Archer, 2010). A similar emphasis on the psychological experience of emotion can be found in the American Method acting tradition, particularly in the influence of Stanislavski's early psychological approach and his concept of "emotional memory" (Carnicke, 1998). Moving beyond this binary opposition between emotional detachment and psychological identification, this paper explores the bodily grounding of human perception, affect, and action.

This paper examines how an actor experiences and performs emotion in front of the camera. Particular attention is given to the performance of negative emotions such as irritation, anger, mild anger, rage, and frustration through a psychophysical approach to screen acting. I use the term "psychophysical" to indicate that acting involves the inseparable interaction of inner and outer dimensions: the body and mind function together in the actor's work. As this seminar explores irritation in a cross-cultural context, I focus on how emotions are enacted and shaped during the creative process. A dominant assumption in discussions of film acting is that genuine emotions are concealed within the actor and that the camera can capture these inner dynamics through its technology. This perspective divides the actor's work into inner and outer dimensions. Emotion is consequently understood as something generated within the actor's psyche and then expressed outwardly.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage discussion of emotions as bodily grounded phenomena through which we attune ourselves to others and to the world. It proposes that emotion cannot be understood solely as an activity of the brain or nervous system; it is also grounded in our bodily existence and spatial relationships (Johnson, 2024). This proposition challenges dominant approaches to acting theory that rely on Cartesian dualism, according to which the mind generates emotion internally and subsequently expresses it through the body.

The paper first outlines key debates about emotion in acting and distinguishes between emotions experienced in everyday life and emotions performed under given circumstances. It then considers phenomenological approaches to emotion, with particular attention to Martin Heidegger's concepts of attunement and mood, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied intentionality. The discussion subsequently turns to selected Asian performance practices and the concept of "*prana vayu*" (vital energy) as a way of reconsidering the relationship between body, perception, and action. Finally, I draw on my autobiographical experience as a screen actor in "Beddegama", a television series directed by Priyanatha Colombage and based on Leonard Woolf's novel "*The Village in the Jungle*". I focus on my performance of the lead character, Silindu, to propose an externalist understanding of emotional recreation in screen acting.

Phenomenology of Emotion

Phenomenology is concerned with human emotion because emotion discloses our relationship with the world and helps reveal fundamental structures of human existence (Szanto & Hilge Landweer, 2020). In this discussion, I draw on two phenomenologists: Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although neither philosopher developed an extensive theory of human emotion in isolation, their accounts of human existence provide important ways of understanding emotion and its role in lived experience. I begin with Heidegger's account and then turn to Merleau-Ponty.

Heidegger's concept of "attunement" is central to understanding his account of emotion as part of our primordial way of existing. He uses the German term "*Befindlichkeit*" to describe "a general condition of an entity existing in the mode of being-in-the-world" (Szanto & Hilge Landweer, 2020, p. 104). Heidegger argues that "Being attuned is not initially related to the psychical; it is itself not an inner condition which then reaches out and leaves its mark on things and persons" (Heidagger cited in Szanto & Hilge Landweer, 2020). Attunements are not simply elements of an individual's psychological life; rather, they are constitutive features of being-in-the-world (ibid, 106). In this way, Heidegger challenges the subject–object duality often associated with emotion and perception. Emotion can instead be understood as mood, which shapes our basic ways of encountering and inhabiting the world.

Building on Heidegger's work, Merleau-Ponty offers an account that supports an understanding of emotion as embodied and externally situated. He rejects a strict division between the inner life of emotion and the outward bodily actions through which it is expressed. Instead, emotions are embodied and intertwined with worldly phenomena. Our bodies enable us to connect with others and the world through characteristic styles of bodily comportment. As Merleau-Ponty's position is summarised by Szanto and Landweer, "mental phenomena are not hidden inside our bodies like marbles in a container. Rather, our body as a whole is constitutive of subjectivity. I don't simply have a body—'I am my body' (Szanto & Hilge Landweer, 2020, p. 198). To understand this position, we must reconsider the nature of the human body. The body is neither merely an object nor a detached subject. It has physical properties—such as size, weight, colour, shape, and texture—but it is also the body through which we experience and engage with the world. These dimensions should not be treated as separate entities; they form a continuous, lived whole. Merleau-Ponty describes this as the "body-subject": "My body is a physical object with properties like size, weight, color, shape, and texture, but it is also and at the same time a subject, something I experience and live through from the inside as I interact with the people and things around me" (ibid).

Merleau-Ponty's account of consciousness is therefore closely connected to the lived body. Bodily intentionality links us to the world through what he calls the "intentional arc." Intentionality here should not be mistaken for a function of an isolated inner mind. Rather, it refers to the body's capacity to orient itself towards the world through its styles of comportment. Emotions, accordingly, can be understood as bodily ways of being attuned to what surrounds us. As the account cited above suggests, emotions are embodied and externalised as styles of bodily comportment or "variations of being in the world" (ibid.). Merleau-Ponty explains this externalist position through the example of an angry or threatening gesture:

> "I do not perceive the anger or the threat as a psychological fact hidden behind the gesture; I read the anger in the gesture. The gesture does not make me think of anger; it is the anger itself" (Merleau-Ponty cited in Szanto & Hilge Landweer, 2020, p. 199).

This externalist perspective provides a useful starting point for reconsidering how an actor's emotions are created and perceived during performance.

Acting and Emotion

One of the major debates in acting theory concerns whether actors experience genuine emotions while performing. This question has generated sustained discussion about the nature and extent of emotional involvement in acting. Susana Bloch argues that acting behaviour is a learned process that can be taught and reproduced at will. Although everyday emotions and performed emotions have similarities, they also differ. As Bloch explains, "in a spontaneous emotion, for example, the emotogenic stimulation comes from the real world, either external or internal; in the 'represented' or 'played' emotion, the stimulus comes from a text, and the reaction is performed voluntarily in a predetermined place and at a programmed moment in time" (Zarrilli, 1995, p. 197).

Here, the term "text" is important because it identifies one source of stimulation and inspiration for the actor. A screenplay or play text establishes the given circumstances, context, and imaginary framework within which the actor develops a character in relation to co-actors, objects, and the environment. If actors are to learn to recreate life-like behaviour on stage or screen, Bloch suggests that their training should address three areas: voluntary control of the body or body parts involved in emotional and verbal behaviour; techniques for managing psychophysiological activation and performance-related stress while balancing excitatory and inhibitory neural processes; and the ability to stimulate an emotion by reproducing, at will, the respiratory, postural, and facial configurations associated with everyday emotional behaviour (Zarrilli, 1995, p. 199).

I am particularly interested in Bloch's third point. Acting behaviour is a skill that actors learn through the coordination of respiration, posture, and facial configuration. Respiration—inhalation and exhalation—is especially important in considering how actors generate and shape emotions in relation to the given circumstances. Breathing operates alongside posture and gesture to produce the desired emotional expression. When an actor adopts a posture and gestural pattern appropriate to the role, the respiratory system is simultaneously engaged in supporting the delivery of the text. The actor's facial expressions, breathing patterns, and bodily gestures become visible to the camera and to the audience. These elements work together rather than functioning as separate components of performance.

Respiration and *Prana Vayu*

The relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of acting is central to the performance of emotion in theatre and film. One influential account holds that emotions originate in the actor's inner world—the mind—and are then expressed through facial expressions and bodily actions. In this model, emotion moves from the inside to the outside. Phillip Zarrilli's discussion of Asian martial arts and dance-drama practices offers a different way of conceptualising the body and emotional performance.

Discussing Usha Nangyar's approach to *Kūṭiyāṭṭam,* Zarrilli explains how metaphors used in training can guide performers towards a different understanding of emotional expression. Usha is instructed to use her eyes as a central organ for inhalation and exhalation—to "breathe through her eyes." Similarly, in the *Kalaripayattu* martial arts tradition of Kerala, practitioners are taught to use the navel as a centre of perception: the navel becomes a centre of seeing. "Breathing through the eyes" and "looking through the navel" function as metaphors that shift conventional understandings of seeing and breathing. Zarrilli explains:

> In a bio-medical sense, it is not possible of course literally to 'breathe' through one's eyes. However, as explained in detail below, in South Asia the term translated as 'breath', prana or prana-vayu, also means 'wind' or 'winds' (whether external in the environment or internal within the body), as well as 'vital energy', i.e., the force of life itself. Prana as the 'wind' or 'vital energy' is therefore an animating force per se, and is not confined to the bio-medical model of the 'breath (Zarrilli, 2011, p. 248).

"*Prana vayu*" can therefore help us reconsider how actors generate and perform emotion through the interaction of breathing, posture, and bodily comportment. In a paper published elsewhere, I explored the relationship between emotion and the actor's gut, suggesting that the gut can be understood as a site through which simulated emotions are generated. In Sri Lankan everyday language, expressions such as "*bokka*", "*boken karanawa*", and "*bokken ranga paanawa*" refer colloquially to an inner, gut-level source of feeling or conviction in acting. In this context, "*bokka"* refers to the bowels or an interior bodily region associated with truthful feeling and performance. As cited in my earlier work, "Recent clinical studies have revealed that there are direct links between the gut and the moods. Writers like Wilson have argued that in order to understand the relationship between the psyche and the body, our attention needs to be directed from the traditional focus on the central nervous system and brain to other parts of the body" (Barnacle, cited in Liyanage, 2016, p. 23). The English expression "butterflies in my stomach" similarly connects emotional experience with sensations in the gut.

The human body has several openings through which it remains connected to the world, including the mouth, ears, and nostrils. The body is therefore not a sealed or self-contained entity; it is continually affected by and responsive to external stimuli. Our relationship with the environment emerges through this ongoing exchange between body and world. As discussed above, "*prana vayu*" enters through the nostrils and mouth and is associated with breath, vitality, and the energy that enables us to engage with our surroundings. In this sense, the inner and outer dimensions of experience are intertwined. The Sanskrit term "*prana*" is commonly associated with breath or vital life force, while "*vayu*" refers to wind or a moving force. The Greek term "*pneuma*" (πνεῦμα) similarly carries meanings associated with wind, breath, and spirit, and has also been connected to ideas of mind.

Screen Acting and Emotional Performance

I now turn to screen acting and the actor's involvement in performing emotion. Konstantin Stanislavski, a major figure in the development of modern acting, focused largely on acting for live performance and developed concepts to explain the psychophysical nature of the actor's work.

His approach sought to understand how actors could perform truthfully and authentically on stage. Although Stanislavski wrote less specifically about film acting, two of his pupils who travelled to America in the early twentieth century helped disseminate his teachings among theatre and film practitioners. As a result, concepts from his earlier work, including "emotion memory" and the "magic if," became influential tools for actors seeking emotional truth in screen performance.

Discussions of screen acting often divide the actor's work into an inner emotional world and an outer physical world, treating these as separate dimensions of the craft. The inner is associated with the actor's emotions, while the outer is associated with physical and facial movements. I consider this division a serious misunderstanding of human emotion and performance. Screen acting does require skills that differ from those used in stage acting, but this does not mean that either medium is inherently more difficult than the other. Tamur Tohver, however, argues that "to achieve minimalistic and nuanced performance on camera, the screen actor needs to develop and portray a more sophisticated and detailed inner world" (Stamatiou and Carnicke, 2026, p. 31). This formulation retains the distinction between inner and outer dimensions.

The "inner world" to which Tohver refers is the emotional portrayal of the character, often described as something hidden within the actor's psyche. From the phenomenological perspective developed in this paper, such a description is incomplete. Nevertheless, Tohver's discussion of Stanislavski's concept of "radiation" ("*izlucheniya*") is useful for thinking about screen acting. Stanislavski used the term to describe an actor's unspoken communication and the subtle, often unconscious, score of actions that can be important on camera (ibid., p. 31). Stanislavski's interest in radiation was also connected to his engagement with Indian yogic traditions. Yoga was used in actor training at the Moscow Art Theatre, with "*prana*", or vital energy, as an important concept. As cited by Stamatiou and Carnicke, "prana rays become the instrument of true communication with the fellow actors, with oneself, with an object, and with the audience" (Techerkasski, cited in Stamatiou and Carnicke, 2026, p. 32).

It is difficult to claim that screen acting is more complex than stage acting, or that emotions portrayed on screen are more truthful than those performed on stage. Actors who work in both media will recognise that each requires a distinct approach. Stage performance often involves a relatively continuous sequence of actions, allowing the actor to sustain the character's physical and emotional score over time. By contrast, screen acting is shaped by the fragmentary nature of filming: scenes may be shot out of sequence, and continuity must be recreated across separate takes.

Nevertheless, within an individual shot, a screen actor can experience a flow of movement, emotion, and action within the time available. Returning to the concept of radiation, John Gillett argues that an actor's unspoken communication is established partly through the eyes: "We listen with the eyes as well as the ears. The eyes create a continuous flow of contact and energy that prompt words, actions, thoughts and feelings, some of which may be expressed, some of which may only be experienced while the other actor is talking" (ibid., p. 31). This resonates with the instruction given to performers in Kūṭiyāṭṭam to "breathe through the eyes." The eyes become a means through which the actor attends to a co-actor and the situation, helping to generate the vocal, physical, and emotional life of the character.

Silindu and His Emotions

I now turn to my own experience of performing Silindu and consider how emotion is enacted in front of the camera. Given the time available, I have selected a sequence from episode 91 of the 100-episode television series "*Beddegama*". In this sequence, Silindu escorts Ralahami, the village headman, to a chena cultivation plot in order to conclude a deal. During the extended sequence, Silindu speaks at length, while Ralahami occasionally interrupts him.

Silindu is the central character in the series. He is a hunter who lives by cultivating a chena and has two young daughters and a sister living in his household. He is a poor man exploited by several people, including merchants from a nearby town and the village headman. These men also direct their attention towards Silindu's beautiful daughters. Eventually, Silindu kills two of his exploiters: a merchant and the village headman. In the selected scene, he deliberately leads Ralahami to the chena, intending to shoot him once he has been separated from the other villagers.



Figure 1: Silindu (Saumya Liyanage) talks about his fear of jungle with Arachchi (Village Headman), *Beddegama*, Episode 91, photo credits, Colambage Films, Creative Force 2026.

As the sequence demonstrates, irritation and anger are its dominant emotional currents (see figure 1). Silindu begins by telling one of his familiar stories about the jungle, its animals and deities, and his fear of the forest. He gradually turns to Ralahami and describes how a buffalo hides in the bush before attacking. He explains the animal's behaviour, its tactics, and its crude and vicious ways of killing. By the end of this extended conversation, Silindu has decided to shoot Ralahami. His words gradually irritate Ralahami, and this irritation intensifies as the story develops. Silindu, by contrast, performs excitement, fear, and vulnerability, followed by a restrained form of anger, as he moves towards the final stage of his plan to kill his prey.

Silindu nevertheless remains calm and focused. His anger is not fully displayed through his facial expression. Instead, his eyes remain open and sharply focused on his prey. His bodily comportment reveals his stance and readiness to kill. Breathing plays a vital role in conveying his emotional engagement with the situation. This is particularly visible in his torso. His dialogue follows a rhythmic pattern, with the diaphragm supporting the low-pitched delivery of his voice. The

movement of his torso makes visible the role of respiration in shaping the emotion required by the scene. His eyes function in a way comparable to the eyes of a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performer: they absorb and remain connected to the person before him. It is as though Silindu is breathing through his eyes. His body moves rhythmically as muscular contractions support his deep voice. These muscular movements, coordinated with continuous respiratory activity in the torso, help ground his emotional engagement in the scene.

Silindu's psychophysical transformation is completed through his interaction with the co-actor playing Ralahami. His emotions do not emerge in isolation; they develop through the interplay between his co-actor and the surrounding environment. As Ralahami's irritation becomes visible through his bodily comportment and facial expressions, Silindu adjusts his own comportment in response. Their performances become attuned to one another through a process of



Figure 2: Silindu (Saumya Liyanage) confronts with village headman showing his discontent with him. *Beddegama* Television Series, Episode 91, Photo Credits, Colambage Films, Creative Force, 2026.

intersubjectivity. The co-actor's bodily attitude invites Silindu to shape his own physical attitude, through which the emotional charge of the scene develops. Silindu's emotions, therefore, are not generated exclusively within an inner psychological space. They emerge and are performed through the interaction between bodies and their shared environment.



Figure 3: Silindu (Saumya Liyanage) shots Arachchi (Village Headman) and reacts to his fall. *Beddegama* Television Series, Episode 91, Photo Credits, Colambage Films, Creative Force 2026.

Conclusion

This reflection on screen acting has explored emotion as a bodily grounded and relational phenomenon rather than as an inner state that is subsequently expressed through the body. Drawing on phenomenology, acting theory, and selected Asian performance practices, I have considered how respiration, posture, gesture, gaze, and interaction contribute to the performance of emotion. The concept of "*prana vayu*" offers one way to understand the dynamic relationship between bodily vitality and the actor's engagement with the world.

My experience of performing Silindu in "*Beddegama*" illustrates how an actor's emotional life can develop through the coordination of bodily actions, breathing, gaze, vocal rhythm, and responsiveness to a co-actor. Irritation and anger in this sequence are not simply concealed feelings revealed by the camera. They take shape through the actor's embodied relationship with the character's circumstances, the other performer, and the environment. This suggests an externalist and relational approach to emotional recreation in screen acting, in which emotion is enacted through the body's ongoing attunement to the world.

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