Uncanny Actor Training – working with entfremdung (estrangement; depersonalisation; derealisation.)

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Abstract

Psychoanalytic thought suggests that aesthetic experience is associated with Freud's notion of the uncanny (1919). This state might be thought of as a necessary aspect of both the creation and the reception of the aesthetic object. Availability to this experience requires some type of depersonalisation or estrangement from the self. This estrangement in turn suggests that there might be a duality occurring in the estranged self: an observing, detached self and a participating self; many actors talk of the uncanny notion of being immersed in a performative action while simultaneously having an experience of observing themselves in performance.

I have worked with 2nd year Drama students undertaking an Actor Training module and the paper examines our processual theatre practice and the attempt to allow access to a conscious experience of estrangement (with all the disturbances and difficulties that this might create) as well as the means to record and reflect upon this phenomenological experience.

Introduction

The development of the concept of *Uncanny Actor Training* was initiated by my desire to encourage students to reflect upon and to gain a greater understanding of their internal psychic processes in relation to the development of their practice as creative actors. For creative actors the spontaneous creation of performance material is an essential task, whether she is involved with devising performance material from scratch or he is working with a text as the stimulus, scaffolding or template for making a performance. [1]

As an educator in the field of Drama I understand that external development is essential; performance technique has to be established and the practical skills to develop this technique, including voice and body work, must be taught and practiced. These are visible aspects of the training of actors. But I am intrigued also by the invisible aspects of creative practices. How do we think about and describe what is going on internally at the moment of the creative act? If it is possible to begin to experience consciously and to describe and reflect upon the unconscious processes that are at play when performance material is being created, then might it be possible for nascent actors and performers to think

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[1] Making a performance is a catch-all phrase used here to include producing a play, dancetheatre, piece of musical or physical theatre, or any other type of performance involving actors/performers in a live medium.

about what it is that blocks their freedom to be creative in those disturbing moments when a spontaneous flow of material is difficult to produce?

The students that I chose to work with were enrolled on a second year module entitled Specialist Practice: Actor Training. I and a colleague in the Drama Division, Dr. Ben Spatz, taught the module. Ben concentrated nominally on physicality and bodily impulse while I began the exploration of spoken language, although in practice there would be crossover between these areas, as would be expected. We did not team-teach but ran our sessions independently of each other after agreeing a structure for our work. The students chose the module expecting to 'undertake a practical enquiry into training for performance, developing and analysing [their] own physical and intellectual toolkits and using these in relation to working three dimensionally with text.' (University of Huddersfield, 2015) The suggestion of an analysis of a physical and the intellectual toolkit through practical enquiry readied them for a learning experience that is rooted in cyclical aspects of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, Moon, 1999, 2013).

Many students arrive at university wanting to *know things* and wanting to *know how to do things*. If pushed further they will suggest that they want to be told *what* they should know and to be told *how* to do the things that they think they should be able to do, things such as acting in the case of drama students. The difficulty in Actor Training for students used to this model of learning is that training is a personal experience that requires the ability to develop self-knowledge. They are not required to learn technique as such. Rather, they are

required to create an inventory of the self, to learn what it is that they need to do in order to be ready and prepared to work at an optimal level, to ideally be in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They are asked to think about focus, concentration, the will to work; to train to develop their capacity in these areas. This requires hard thought about sometimes difficult and disturbing experiences: why am I unable to work with my exercise partner on this moment of tenderness between us? Why can I not be bothered to warm up my body properly even though I know that if I do not, I will suffer tomorrow after the hard physical session today? Why am I terrified when asked to close my eyes and walk towards my partner, even though I know they will keep me safe?

I considered that it was possible to give the students an experience of the uncanny, of the estrangement that might occur and be experienced by the actor in the moment or moments of the creative act. Furthermore, I imagined that if, prior to that, I carefully constructed a process of other experiences concerned with internal affective states, and gave the students analogous means to record and reflect upon those experiences, then they might be more receptive and aware of their uncanny creative experience when it occurred and thus help them to develop their understanding of their own singular processes of creation in a conscious and considered reflective manner. In turn this might deepen their understanding of their own needs in developing their identities as creative practitioners.

Theoretical Framework

Much has been written by Psychoanalysts about the nature of artistic practice, aesthetics and creativity, notably by Hanna Segal (1991), Donald Meltzer (Gosso, 2004), Hector Fiorini (Goldstein, 2013) and Kenneth Wright (2009). There are two excellent collections of essays/articles edited by Gabriela Goldstein and Sandra Gosso called *Art in Psychoanalysis* (2013) and *Psychoanalysis and Art* (2004) respectively. These writers concentrate on a wider timeframe, giving insightful clinical examples of artists and their trials and tribulations, or supplying an analysis of aesthetic objects such as performances, novels, poems, or looking at creative practice of artists and their relationship with form; but I wanted to help my students to investigate their processes of creativity through an analysis of the actual moments of creative action – hence the focus on performance as a useful form through which to try to understand the creative action. The instability of the aesthetic object of a performance is analogous to the ephemeral activity that creates it and this distinguishes it from literature, painting and sculpture.

I have developed my understanding of a way in which to describe or to conceive of the internal psychic experience of the creative act through concentrating in this instance on the combination of two psychoanalytic metapsychologies, and some of their accompanying concepts: Sigmund Freud's idea of the uncanny (1919); Melanin Klein's understanding of the nature of projection and introjection (1997, p.8), and Wilfred Bion's concept of container and contained

(1984, p 90) developed from Klein's ideas. [2] I will explicate these ideas in relation to actor training, beginning with psychoanalyst and poet Gregorio Kohon's use of Freud's term, the uncanny.

In *Reflections of the Aesthetic Experience* (2016) Kohon suggests that aesthetic experience is heightened or widened by unconscious and conscious memory of previous aesthetic experiences. Availability to this experience requires some type of depersonalisation or estrangement from the self: 'the subject must risk, however briefly, losing the boundaries that keep the self safe and sound' (Kohon, 2016, p.5). I suggest that it is possible to develop this idea further and that the conditions for the individual observer to be able to have an aesthetic experience are analogous to the conditions in which the artist creates the aesthetic object, which itself provides the conditions for the aesthetic experience to take place. The type of artist referred to in this paper is the actor and the aesthetic object is the performance.

> The symptom of estrangement, since it was first discovered, has always been referred to as a *feeling,* never a *knowledge* or a *consciousness* of estrangement.
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> (Federn, 1932, p.62)

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[2] I know that there is also much to be considered in Donald Winnicott's work, especially in *Playing and Reality (2005)* and in further research I will combine his development of the idea of the transitional object with those developed from Freudian and Kleinian ideas.

Psychoanalyst Paul Federn, in thinking about estrangement, suggests that there is a detachment, a duality that occurs in people experiencing estrangement: an observing, detached self and a participating self (Kohon, 2016, p.9) This is a credible description of what many people experience when in the process of acting or performing. I have, as a professional actor and as a student actor, many times had the experience of feeling as if I am standing two feet behind myself observing and editing my performance (while at the same time being immersed in character or action) – what I can now understand as an uncanny experience of estrangement. I have heard many other performers describe this experience, particularly when they 'feel' that they are experiencing what Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as optimal flow (1990). It can be a disturbing experience and the experience teeters on the edge of falling apart but may also be what psychoanalyst Michel de M'Uzan describes as a 'sort of exaltation' (2009, p.204). An uncanny experience might be felt as pleasant or potentially unpleasant depending upon both the factors at play in the creation of the experience and on the person's constitutional reaction to this disturbance of everyday reality. Freud notes in his essay 'The "Uncanny"' (1919) that a sense of estrangement from the self occurs when something that is familiar, but which has been repressed into the Unconscious, returns. This is similar to the experience of déjà vu, which psychoanalysis might describe as an analogous repressed memory feeling being projected into a current occurrence.

Bion's development of Kleinian metapsychology also illuminates the creative act. To begin with the primitive materials for creation are needed, stemming from

what might be thought of as an unconscious well of creativity. This is analogous to what Segal speaks of in relation to Bion's description of 'the first primitive stages of development' when the 'infant is filled with raw perceptions, objects and emotions' (Segal 1991, p.50), which Bion names 'beta-elements' (Bion 1984, p.6) Beta-elements are those unknown feelings and impulses which disturb the infant and which she feels need to be evacuated or projected. If the beta-elements are to be processed and made comprehensible, Bion suggests that alpha-function has to occur, to transform the beta-elements into alpha-elements so that they can be introjected. Bion suggests that the maternal figure provides this alpha-function, becoming a metabolising container to contain and transform the beta-elements. The infant in time introjects both the transformed primitive material and the alpha-function itself, thereby being able to metabolise her own material. I suggest that this introjected and much developed process is in action when an actor is creating material from unconscious (and conscious) stimuli. The actor in a moment of improvisation metabolises the raw material and allows it to be formed into something useful, thus being the container and the contained, providing alpha-function for her own raw beta elements. Anxiety (akin to that generated by the infant's beta-elements) results from having to work with the unknown and unknowable; I aimed to allow students to be consciously aware of this state, to bear it, and to metabolise it for themselves in order to develop and understand their creative capacity. I hoped that students would have an experience that we could begin to reflect upon, think about and describe in these terms.

The Experimental Session

I designed a three-hour practical Actor Training session. It ran twice for two different groups of students in two different studios, on different days, with eleven participants and eight participants, a roughly equal balance of young women and men. I was able to introduce the ideas of the uncanny and estrangement and the container and contained in a rudimentary manner before the experimental session, as I worked with these groups for four sessions prior to it. But I did not want to do more than introduce the ideas, so that I would not pre-empt responses to the session or lead the students to expect a particular type of experience. I had also recorded eight short monologues, spoken in a neutral fashion, four by a male voice, four by a female voice. I transferred these to an iPod for use later in the session.

The session began with a vocal and physical warm up of twenty minutes duration. This was familiar to the students, including exercises for voice and body that we had used many times. I wanted to create the usual sense of safety and containment that is a necessary environment in which to ask participants to extend themselves. At this point I, and the familiar exercises, were acting as Bion's container (1984, p.90). After the warm up I introduced a simple exercise that was unknown to the students. I asked them to stand opposite each other in pairs and to shake hands (I joined in with the first group to make the pairs equal). They then took five steps walking backwards so that there was some distance between the individuals in the pairs. They walked back towards each other and shook hands again. We did this twice. Now, hoping that this knowledge was embodied I asked them to take the five steps back and repeat the walking

forwards and shaking hands, but this time with their eyes closed. I hoped that the embodied knowledge of the action would guide them through this final part of the exercise, where they were entering in to the unknown to some extent. Some of us found each other's hands and some did not. But achieving the contact was not what was at stake. Giving ourselves over to the experience was the important aspect of the exercise, as well as opening up the senses, other than sight, in a heightened manner.

Freud, in tracing the etymology and many definitions of heimlich (uncanny but also literally translated as homely) suggests that the word also ' exhibits one [meaning] which is identical with its opposite '*unheimlich*. What is Heimlich thus becomes unheimlich.' (Freud, 1919, p 224). The familiarity of the shaking hands exchange in our exercise was both familiar, (heimlich) and unfamiliar (unheimlich) when repeated blind. I hoped that this might edge the students closer to a sense of uncanniness.

Having introduced the notion of working without sight I asked the students to pair up again and to lead their partners around the studio, holding on to their hands, while those being led worked with their eyes closed. The leaders were instructed to keep their partners out of physical danger. As they progressed I suggested that the leaders become more ambitious in leading their partners around the space. Most of the pairs were able to run around the space having created trust through their careful work with each other. After this first aspect of the exercise using touch, which lasted about ten minutes, I asked the students to repeat it, but to use sound instead to lead their blind partners around the room.

Having spent another five minutes using sound as a leading mechanism I asked all the students to free write about the experience for three minutes. Free writing entails continuous writing, putting whatever comes into one's mind down on the paper without censorship or judgement and without trying to construct a narrative or to organise those thoughts and feelings that emerge. The pen should not stop moving until the allotted time is up. This subjective writing tries to capture immediately those impulses that emerge from the unconscious (and conscious) parts of the mind in response to the prior experience. I hoped that this would act both as a reflect tool to capture raw material related to the experience that could be reflected upon at a later time, and to give me some inkling of the effect of the work, if the students felt able to share their writing with me at a later date.[3]

After this first period of free writing we reversed the pairs so that the leaders became the led and repeated the exercise, including the free writing.

I them moved to the last exercise of the session. Each student in turn was given the iPod and headphones and asked to 'perform' the monologue that was being fed to them by the neutral voice through the headphones. None of the students had prior knowledge of the material. In effect they were being asked to improvise but without having to come up with words with which to improvise. Improvisation for young performers is a daunting prospect as they often feel the need to be entertaining, which creates intense anxiety. I explained that there was no correct manner in which to engage with this exercise but that they should

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[3] Across the two sessions ten of the students handed me their free writing at the end of the three hours.

think of it as an experiential experiment they were undertaking and to just see what happened. I made the comparison with the free writing, suggesting that they try to complete the performance task without judgement and without censoring themselves. After each student completed the performance task they took their paper and again completed a piece of free writing about the experience. Many of them wrote for five minutes or more. When everyone had completed their free writing we sat in a circle and I asked open questions about their experience of the headphone performance exercise, asking them to either refer to their free writing or to other remembered aspects of the experience. I suggested that there might or there might not be commonality of experience. I stressed that there was not a question of how 'well' they had done the task but rather to think about what their experience of the task had been. It was noticeable that at first, in the spoken feedback, there was a desire to articulate how 'difficult' the task had been, before going on to try to explore what had been happening in their minds as they completed the improvisatory task. Here is a flavour of some of the spoken responses (with my commentary in brackets):

a) When I was doing it so many memories were brought up. I could see the little chocolate rabbit that I was given as a child (her monologue included a fantasy of eating chocolate).

b) All I could think of was my sister's unwell child (her monologue was related to pain).

c) When I stopped trying it became easier (he is aware of effort being wasted or being activated for non-useful application).

d) I was aware that I didn't think I was doing it right (see his understanding of a harsh superego/critical voice blocking his creativity at that moment).

e) I started to stand differently and pronounce words differently (a conscious experience of depersonalisation, standing apart from the experience while allowing it to take place).

f) My mind was split on trying to act, trying to listen, trying to find character, but my body was doing something else (a feeling of depersonalisation).

g) There was another brain [mind] that I was trying to find a way into.

h) I was terrified but able to carry on.

i) I was thinking about everything that I was doing and then taking a step back from it.

j) You've got this second mind.

The free writing also elicited responses that might be linked to aspects of the uncanny (my comments in brackets again):

1. Somehow I could immediately think of what to do in terms of acting. It all just fell into place. At first I thought it would be incredibly difficult…but it strangely worked (noticing something happening if not quite being able to articulate exactly what it was at this point).

2. It was the strangest thing I have ever done but yet the most exciting I was nervous scared but in a strange way I really liked the feeling (something heimlich and unheimlich at the same time?).

3. Senses completely heightened sometimes feeling like I was in a tunnel, sometimes feeling like I was being led by just a hand and nothing else, no

body just the hand (eyes closed exercise leading to an experience of the uncanny).

Many of these immediate responses suggest that some measure of estrangement and depersonalisation had been experienced by some of the participants. A few articulated this sense of depersonalisation in a quite specific and clear manner. Respondent f's spoken feedback suggests to me that depersonalisation and the Freudian aspect of the uncanny is linked with Bion's notion of the container and the contained. The apparatus of the mind that 'was split on trying to act, trying to listen, trying to find character' acted as a container for the impulses, the raw beta elements that Bion conceptualises. Having provided alpha-function the body is free to use these alpha elements, articulated so well as 'but my body was doing something else'.

Almost all the participants managed to articulate something clear about the mental processes that occurred while they were performing, even if they were disappointing or frustrating or blocked experiences. In another session perhaps everyone's experience might have been different. But this ability to be able to notice, articulate in quite precise detail and reflect upon mental and physical performance experience, in a language that could go on to be framed by a theory of mental functioning (potentially in this case using psychoanalytic concepts about the manner of mental functioning both conscious and unconscious to provide the frame) is a positive and useful step and allows the students to see the academic value of their own contextualised experience.

Conclusion

To develop this approach further I intend to integrate aspects of these exercises into the training from the very beginning, rather than running all of the material as a discrete session. Alongside this I would provide an initial lexicon with which we could explore and give accurate articulation to these experiences. I would want the students to develop the lexicon for themselves but to have a number of agreed terms and ideas that we could hold in common to share our experiences. Given that one of the guiding principles of psychoanalytic thought and technique is to be able to bear paradox and to bear not knowing, it is a useful language to help students to begin to make sense of their experiences, or to be able to articulate the difficulty of not being able to make sense of their experiences.

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