

Foreword



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From Sight to Vision

The effects of seeing again and again

Do we see with our eyes, our ears, our memory?

In an interview in *Letras libres* of December 2021, the Mexican composer Mario Lavista explains the connecting bridges between music and other artistic fields. What Beaudelaire calls “the correspondence between the arts” occurs for him - a musician - not only with poetry and literature, but particularly with painting. Lavista says: if we look closely, every painting is full of sounds. Music can be heard not only in Degas’ paintings of young ballerinas in which a pianist or a violinist can be glimpsed. Manet’s young flautist in uniform... what tune is he playing?

Some paintings are deafening. In *The Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello we can hear the pawing of horses, the thud of those who fall, the neighing of those dying, spears clashing against armour and the shouts of the attacking soldiers in the background. You want to plug your ears against the noise and sounds that vibrate *inside* the painting.

In *Músicas dormidas* (sleeping musicians) by Rufino Tamayo two young people at sunset are lying beside a flute and a guitar. What melody are they dreaming of? Lavista imagines being able to transcribe it into a score. And so he does. He concludes that many of his musical compositions are an approach to other artistic disciplines through music. It is not a rational approach but a subjective process. The vehicle that allows this approach to be expressed is a knowledge of the rules of music.

Lavista’s ‘musical’ way of seeing is a stimulating didactic key to developing the visual imagination of a young actor. It is a good exercise to engage the faculties of the brain to conjure up and listen to the music of a text by Shakespeare or Beckett, and dance the words to the sounds and rhythms they emanate. Wasn’t this the music and the sound universe that Stanislavski was able to read from Chekov’s *Seagull* when he materialised puffs of wind, rustling of leaves, crackling of crickets, croaking of frogs - his famous Chekovian atmosphere?





Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano* (1460)

The new is explained by the old

We see through the lens of what we know. The eyes send information to our tripartite brain - reptilian, limbic and new cortex - and each of these parts weighs it independently and reacts on the basis of instinct, cognition, expectation and habit. Each new stimulus is compared to something we have already experienced or are able to imagine. Columbus tasted a pineapple for the first time in the New Indies and described it in a letter to Queen Isabela of Spain as a fruit larger and with a sweeter flavour than an orange from Andalusia. The new is explained by the old.

It is difficult to have virgin eyes, capable of forgetting our conditioned reflexes and mental habits.

Those who define ISTA as “a school of the gaze” are right. It is indeed a situation that teaches how to see. Watching an actor repeat the same scene or a fragment of stage behaviour produces monotony. We are unable to hold the attention and we slip into a mental state of unresponsiveness. Seeing again and again pushes the mind to drift and forces us to overcome the reflex to find an immediate logical justification. Without any guarantee of success, we are waiting to discover other paths, to grasp the tenuous threads that may lead us elsewhere, signs and symptoms that open up to unexpected correspondences. No one has taught us to discern the music of tensions with our eyes, to notice with our nervous system the impulses in the discordant and simultaneous rhythms that make up the flow of the actor/dancer’s presence, or to lead this presence towards gestures and movements from a performance that impacted us and which, like a ghost, haunts our body memory.

The stubbornness or the obligation to see again and again - however uncomfortable this may be for our brain hungry for new stimuli - enables us to overcome the "sound barrier". It is the transition from sight to *vision*, as when an elderly person is operated for cataracts in the eyes. Suddenly we distinguish outlines and shades. We are able to notice similarities and equivalences in situations that previously appeared to us as separate and mute worlds. It took years for me to orient myself in the intricacy of impulses and tensions that I was unable to distinguish in the expressive dynamics of an actor. Our senses and our brain begin *to see*, thanks to the knowledge that we incorporated during the demanding discipline of seeing again and again.

Emigration and monotony

Vision is knowing how to see, and it is acquired through experience. An important factor for me was my condition as an emigrant in a country where I could neither speak my language nor understand the local one. As an Italian in Norway, the task of making sense of words which were incomprehensible sounds fell on my eyes by focusing on the physical behaviour and body tensions of my interlocutors.

On a professional level I reached the state of *vision* thanks to a particular apprenticeship in the 13 Rows Theatre of Jerzy Grotowski and Ludwik Flaszen in Poland. For nearly three years I was a spectator of two performances that I watched almost every night: *Akropolis* by Wyspianski and *Doctor Faust* by Marlowe. I knew them down to the smallest detail. I identified kinesthetically with the actors, with their gestures and rhythmic variations, predicting pauses or detecting the slightest discrepancies in their scores. I closed my eyes and, through their voices, my body echoed their dynamics in space. I covered my ears, and my eyes recognised the vocal actions of the actors from the tensions in their faces, hands and spines.

Seeing again and again made me discover the micro-improvisation that every evening enlivens the score of an actor in each scene of a performance. It was the moment when I crossed the "sound barrier". This awareness deepened with my Odin Teatret actors. In addition to the performances which I attended every evening, following for years their daily training enabled me to perceive the nuances of their *sats*, each change in tension, the synchrony between the accentuation in their speech and in their physical actions. The repetitive observation of the somatic signals (*sats*) in the exercises sharpened my perception and led me to distinguish clearly *the first sign*.

The action that opens a door: the first sign

What do one tree, one billiard ball, one game of chess and one depression have in common? The number one. This aphorism by the scientist and philosopher Jorge Wagensberg seems to challenge our intelligence and our incorporated knowledge.

What do artists have in common - a sculptor, a painter, a composer, a poet and an actor? The *first sign*, the proto-element that makes the hidden reality of the artist's inner

world perceptible and sensorially manifest to the perception of an observer. It is the physical process of transition from the artist's inner space to the social space shared with others. The intangible and invisible idea is transposed into a real act. The first sign is the action that opens a door.

The first sign is an inner tension that becomes distinguishable to the senses and mind of the observer: the first word written on the paper by the poet, the first brushstroke spread on the canvas by the painter, the first note drawn on the music sheet by the composer, the first chipping away of marble by the sculptor, the first action by the actor. The first sign is the mother cell from which the composite living organisation of the result grows in any artistic process.

For the actor, the first sign is a *sats*, an impulse, a change in tension that can also occur in immobility, but which is felt by the observer's kinesthetic sense. No psychological justification, artistic intention or expressive will: only the action of making a variation in the muscular tone in one's body in order to impact the kinesthetic sense of the viewer.

I cannot help remembering Borges' words: about 300 metres from the pyramids, I bent down, picked up a fistful of sand, let it fall silently a bit further away and said in a low voice: I am modifying the Sahara.

The eye as a microscope

If we wished to establish a science of the creative process, we could think of two needs and two aims:

1. a non-utilitarian need or pleasure in knowing (the aim of pure science);
2. a need or a pleasure in achieving a goal by balancing our creativity between two driving forces: on the one hand our intuition and imagination, on the other, an acquired technical knowledge and reasoned calculation (the aim of applied science).

Any science, however, begins by distinguishing the basic elements from those which are secondary.

From the point of view of theatre anthropology, the basic dynamic element on the first day of an actor's apprenticeship or creative process is the change in tension. Without this mother cell, the development of a complex organism that the spectator perceives as a *body-in-life* is not possible. This first change in tension triggers the actor/dancer's radiating presence that becomes representation, rhythm, energy flow, form and meaning, expression, association and allusion, memory and fantasy. The actor's action is a synonym for a change in tension engaging the whole body. Hence the importance of the feet and the basic stance. Weight is transformed into energy.

Learning to see means being able to analyse and enhance the behaviour of actors/dancers in an ever more detailed way. At the final stage of this analysis we arrive at the *sats*, the elementary unit which constitutes the organic dramaturgy of the actors/dancers: their presence. These minute tonic changes cause an immediate effect in the organism of the observers. The spectators' brains and the cognitive system of their perception are able to anticipate the actor's movements with a neuronal simulation and

with a muscular engagement. This process involves their muscular and mental energy, and a dynamic reactive bond is established with the performers. The actors/dancers must develop a sensory effectiveness regardless of the story they tell. It is their technical skill which generates an *effect of intensified life* in what they are doing. This effect of organicity constitutes their scenic *bios*. Through it, we spectators experience coherence and kinesthetic empathy which persuade our senses.

The sensory dimension of knowledge: structure and movement

The first sign is connected with the origin, with the hidden or conscious motivation that decides our choice to reveal it to others. It is also connected to our ineffable artistic vocation or to our longing to escape from reality. For the actors/dancers, the impulse, the *sats* - this packet of energy - is the first brick in the building of a cathedral: a parallel, *sacred* (which etymologically means separated) space into which the spectator should slip.

The first sign is humble. It is a concrete, measurable, sometimes tangible expression: words on paper, a succession of points evolving into a line on the canvas, a graph of musical notes, a brushstroke that reveals the energy of the hand. For the actor, the first sign is the segmentation of impulses into a behaviour whose forms affect the spectator's perception. Life manifests itself through movement: tensions within forms which change according to a more or less evident rhythm in a determined space. Walking, running, reading a book while sitting or lying down, arguing with someone, peeling a banana are for the actor a proto-form of dance, a progression of segmented movements intertwined with simultaneity and becoming a flow of *sats*, alternation of tensions. The *bios*, the life of the actions does not reside in the external forms of the score but in the forces-tensions that live within it.

In theatre and dance, forms of life spring from two forces: structure and movement. The movement attacks the structure trying to destroy it: the structure defends itself trying to neutralise the movement. The two forces, equally powerful, have different characteristics. Those of movement are spontaneity, the dynamic and powerful capacity to expand and brevity. Those of the structure are elastic inertia, resistance and an ability to survive.

Actors/dancers nurture their *presence* between structure and movement, aware of the profound dissimilarity between seed and fruit, between the result of the process and the idea that originated it. Their presence is the sensorial dimension of a personal knowledge and a historical experience in a subliminal dialogue with the spectators' physical/archaic memory and the maze of their minds. ■

Translation: Judy Barba