

Exploring How Directors Comprehend Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore how film directors comprehend an actor's performance while it is being created by the actor on set, as the camera is rolling. The position of screen acting within film scholarship is discussed to draw attention to just how recently film scholars have shifted their position regarding the actor's contribution to the film. This is followed by an examination of the valuable insights into comprehending actor performance that new discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive science are uncovering, along with first-hand research obtained from interviews with Australian directors and actors. By seeking to unpack to a more conscious level what many people (including highly regarded directors), believe to be predominantly an intuitive activity, we may better understand what is actually taking place during that moment on a film set when the director is comprehending the work of the actor as it is being created. This paper argues that it is largely through acute perception, which is linked to an ever-expanding body of both conscious and tacit knowledge regarding actor performance, rather than merely instinct or intuition, that the director is able to comprehend the actor's performance.

This paper seeks to explore how directors comprehend¹ an actor's performance. First, the position of screen acting within film scholarship is discussed to draw attention to just how recently film scholars have shifted their position regarding the contribution of the screen actor. The work of Naremore (2006), Baron (2008), McDonald (2004), and Carnicke (2008) is discussed, together with first-hand research obtained from interviews with Australian directors and actors. To bring a fresh perspective to this enquiry I draw upon valuable insights into comprehending performance made possible by new discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive science, particularly the work of Hart, McConachie, and Nellhaus (2006), Enticott et al (2008), and Fairchild et al (2010).

Although the actor/director relationship is essentially collaborative and organic by nature, and together they explore the psycho-physiological foundations of the character, and the character's emotional journey throughout the film, there comes a moment on a film set, when the camera is rolling, where both the actor and director must discharge their duties as individuals. The actor must act, and the director must direct, which at this particular instance requires the director to comprehend the actor's performance. This paper argues that it is the director's acute perception, which has been honed over many years, and is informed by an ever-expanding body of both conscious and tacit knowledge, that enables the director to comprehend the actor's performance, and not merely instinct or intuition, or a subjective evaluation based upon the director's own personal feelings or reaction to the performance.

As mentioned, the actor/director relationship is by nature collaborative. Roman Polanski's on set creative methodology is quite actor-centric, "I always set up with actors, without thinking of the camera. I observe them while they rehearse, and then later I try to film it" (Sherman 1976, p.118). Steven Spielberg goes further when he speaks of working with actor Djimon Hounsou during the making of *Amistad* (Spielberg 1997):

Djimon [Hounsou, who plays Cinque, the leader of the slave revolt] is such a gifted individual that I wish I could take credit for his performance. I didn't have to do anything with him. (Spielberg quoted in Kagan 2000, p. 162)

Anthony Minghella (*Truly, Madly, Deeply* 1990, *The English Patient* 1996, *Cold Mountain* 2003) believes directing actors is a fundamental function of the director:

The job, as I understand it, of directing is to create a space in which actors feel empowered—and the more space you take up as a director, the less room they’ve got ... At the same time, if you do nothing, they can’t see the space they’re working in.” (Minghella quoted in Kagan 2000, p. 153)

Rolf de Heer (*Bad Boy Bubby* 1993, *The Tracker* 2002, *Ten Canoes* 2006) makes a similar point:

After the script, the cast is the most important thing, and that’s what we do when we’re on set, we’re capturing the performance. Working closely with them in a way that allows them to have more space to create good performances. (Flaherty 2012, web page)

Comey makes it clear that directors should not automatically assume that directing actors is a skill easily acquired:

Many [directors] are under the misconception that because they have seen so many movies they understand acting. Developing an eye for performance is difficult and requires hard work, diligent study, and possibly acting classes, and even some acting to fully understand the craft. (Comey 2006, p. 61)

Furthermore, there is a belief amongst some directors that instinct and intuition, as well as their own empathetic capabilities, play the major role in their ability to comprehend an actor’s performance. Australian director Richard Sarell says, “So, it’s instinctive, and intuitive, but we’re all equipped with these things, these abilities. I don’t think there is anything special about it” (Sergi 2011)². When Michael Radford (*Il Postino* 1994) is on set says he looks for the chemistry of the scene, for “the tingle”, and “...and suddenly it happens. It’s very hard to put your finger on what it is, but you know when it’s not there” (Radford quoted in Kagan 2000, p. 148). As in other creative arts, the belief in instinct and intuition is prevalent throughout the film industry and Judith Weston’s book, *The Film Director’s Intuition: script analysis and rehearsal techniques* (2003) is a fine example.

According to Cynthia Baron, since Walter Benjamin published his 1936 essay ‘*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*’, in which he “proposed that the screen actor should be considered an inanimate stage prop, chosen for its characteristics and inserted in the proper place” (Baron and Carnicke 2008, p.12) film scholarship has been largely disinterested in screen acting. Baron quotes Jeremy Butler³ who noted that when major semioticians turned their attention to cinema they:

... were 'blind to performance', [and] that Christian Metz was 'remarkably mute about the position of actors' performances ... in his ground breaking books, *Film Language and Language and the Cinema*.' In fact, according to Butler, performance elements have no place in Metz's system, instead placing emphasis on framing and editing (Baron and Carnicke 2008, p.49).

Paul McDonald believes that screen acting has been neglected along with sound and lighting design in favour of analysing the pictorial and montage elements of the film:

Since the decline of structuralist analysis and the emergence of star studies, film scholarship has diversified in its concerns. It may be wondered therefore why film acting should still continue to be an underdeveloped area of scholarly analysis. One explanation for this would seem to be the very complexity that acting presents to any serious work of film analysis. (McDonald 2004, p.25)

Supporting McDonald's point of view, Baron goes on to note that even after Naremore's insightful 1988 work, *Acting in the Cinema*, where he:

... deftly illuminates a remarkable range of expressive techniques and effectively makes the case that film acting can be far more complex than simple performing. Some observers who acknowledge this complexity still categorise screen performance as 'received acting'. (Baron and Carnicke 2008, p.12-13)

This position towards screen acting is difficult to fathom when viewing films where the *mise-en-scène* of certain scenes is so minimalistic compared to what the actor is delivering through their performance.

For example, in an early scene in *Black Swan* (Aaronofsky 2010) Natalie Portman, who plays Nina Sayers, discovers that she has unexpectedly been selected to play the lead role of the Swan Queen. Upon learning this news Portman/Sayers rushes into a toilet cubicle to call her mother on her cell phone. This scene is presented as a single shot, which appears to be lit from an overhead fluorescent lamp that minimises any shadows. Portman/Sayers, framed in a tight mid-shot, presses herself backwards against the door of the cubicle for the duration of the scene. The make-up and wardrobe are relatively neutral and understated. This short scene is highly dramatic and emotionally charged primarily because of Portman/Sayers' performance and not solely the *mise-en-scène*.

Over recent years it is becoming more widely accepted amongst some film scholars that screen acting does play a significant role in the organisation of a film's meaning. Yet, even some of these scholars have difficulty in determining to whom to attribute credit for the performance. For Lillian Ross and Helen Ross, "There's no way of distinguishing what the director does and what the actor does." (Ross and Ross 1984, p.308). Further complicating Ross' point, Bare (1971, 2000) suggests there is also no way of knowing whether the editorial re-construction of the performance is the work of the director or the editor. Naremore also acknowledges this:

The problem is exacerbated because acting in movies can be significantly manipulated in the editing room and because some of the best performances are virtually invisible, especially when an actor doesn't seem to be doing anything special and doesn't change from film to film. (Naremore 2006, p.61-62)

Considering that an actor's performance is usually made up of several different shots of various sizes and angles, edited together from any number of takes, the only aspect of the entire on screen performance for which there is any confidence is that the actor created that portion that exists for the duration of a single shot. There can be no certainty that the actor created the unified performance of any given scene, unless it was filmed in a single-shot.

Naremore is correct in suggesting that it is extremely difficult to list the full extent of evaluative criteria a director might use in comprehending an actor's performance. Yet as Ekman and Friesen discovered in their landmark study *Emotion in the Human Face* (1971) the human face is capable of producing at least 3,000 meaningful facial expressions (Conniff 2007, p.48).

Baron alludes to this when discussing a scene in *A Woman Under the Influence* (Cassavetes 1974). Baron highlights how the character Mabel Longhetti, played by Gena Rowlands, expresses a string of varied, though nonetheless connected, emotions. "In the space of three seconds, the expressions that pass across Rowland's face and through her eyes convey Mabel's flutter of varied emotions" (Baron and Carnicke 2008, p.42). All of which the director must observe, register, accurately interpret and comprehend, as the camera is rolling.

Furthermore, the possible meaning of an individual facial expression, which is the result of expressed emotional stimuli, and a part of the actor's communication system, becomes further complicated because it occurs as part of a continuous string of other facial, vocal and body expressions for the duration of the performance. In this context, an emotional facial expression acts as a stimulator intended to trigger an emotional response from the spectator, as well as communicating to the spectator that the actor/character is experiencing a certain emotion.

Essentially, this is what Kuleshov discovered in the early 1920s. Eisenstein believed that as long as the details of an emotion the actor is trying to express in their performance are similar enough to the expected details one would associate with that emotion then it is possible to stimulate that emotion within the actor, and therefore that emotion would be seen and understood by the audience (Eisenstein 1970). This is supported by research undertaken by Eva Oliveira, who describes these as Objective Emotions, a scene showing happy people, and Subjective Emotions, triggering an empathetic response in the spectator (Oliveira 2011, p.4).

Researchers Righart and de Gelder argue that facial expressions are not perceived in isolation. In their study, when the surrounding emotional scene was congruent to the facial expression displayed, participants in the study more accurately recognised the facial expression. However, when the surrounding emotional scene was less congruent, accurate recognition declined (Righart 2008). Australian director and educator Tony Wickert makes a similar point, "When you want the audience to understand the thinking processes inside the character, then the behaviours need to be consistent with that" (Sergi 2011). However, for the actor, director, and audience, facial expressions are primarily the external representation of internal emotions and psychological states. This is what Stanislavski described as the 'inner creative state' and 'outer creative state'. The union of these two states produces the 'general creative state', which Stanislavski believed was the natural working state for the actor:

Then every feeling, mood, experience you have created is reflected externally. The more directly, vividly, precisely the outer reflects the inner, the better, the more broadly, the more fully the audience will understand the life of the human spirit you have created. (Stanislavski 2010, p. 583)

As the actor performs the scene the emotions they are experiencing are hopefully being communicated through the full range of the expressive capabilities of their bodies. McCallum states in an article about the rehearsal techniques of William Hurt and Robyn Nevin, that actors must not only find within themselves the most appropriate emotions, but they must also shape those emotions to suit that particular moment in the life of the character within the overall story, and then control the expression of that emotion so that it is communicated at the most apt time and in the most suitable way (McCallum 2010, p.7). Harrison Ford sees things similarly:

Neither am I like or unlike the characters I play. I create a character out of those things that I hope will tell the story. I try to behave emotionally and realistically in the context of the moment. So I don't have anything to work with except my own experience, my own understanding, my own empathy. (Ford quoted in Pringle 2010)

According to Conniff, “emotional expressions are highly nuanced, and some of the most interesting emotions occur in uncontrolled ways.” (Conniff 2007, p.52). For Wickert, when the actor is wholly absorbed in their character, when their own personality has receded the most, and the personality of the character has been given enough space to become fully present, that is when the actor’s performance techniques begin to diminish sufficiently for the actor to ‘be’ the character, rather than ‘play’ the character:

I'm looking to see whether in their attempt to be like the person ... that they have verisimilitude ... But they also will reveal general human traits in their behaviour, which support that. In other words, you will see, if they are working well, that they would have triggered their autonomic process. That is, spontaneously, and outside the control of the actor, bits of behaviour will start to occur which will support the intention. (Wickert quoted in Sergi 2011)

This is similar to the point that Richard Dyer makes that “Authenticity is established or constructed in media texts by the use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy” (Dyer 1991, p.137). Cate Blanchett feels that people, in general, have a certain distrust of words and that physical actions carrier a far greater sense of believability, hence the old adage that ‘actions speak louder than words’:

I believe film is a much more literal medium because we receive images as the truth. We often mistrust words. But once you see something, once you see Barbara stroking Sheba's arms, then we receive this as having a certain meaning. (Cate Blanchett quoted in Porton 2007, p.18)

If the ability of the director in comprehending an actor's performance is to be understood beyond instinct and intuition, beyond having a very finely tuned emotional meter or highly sensitive mirror neurons that are capable of empathising with authentic human behaviour and distinguishing the honesty and sincerity of the performance, then it is necessary to further unpack what the director is doing. As one of Australia's most experienced actors, Alan Hopgood is unsure how a director knows when he achieves 'an authentic' performance, "How do I think he [the director] knows when I've nailed it? I have no idea" (Sergi 2011). Australian actor and director Margaret Mills expresses a similar point of view, "That's a very good question. I can see it, but I'm not sure I can describe it ... It's difficult to ask, how do I know when I'm happy. What are the signs that I'm seeing?" (Sergi 2011).

This is significant because for many directors' their comprehension of what Naremore calls the 'evaluative criteria' remains largely unarticulated, subjective and is often centred primarily within their own emotional, psycho-physiological and intellectual reaction to the performance, rather than from some form of conscious, carefully structured, analysis of what they see and hear the actor doing. When asked how they know when the actor has achieved an authentic performance, many directors will often say that they 'just know' or they can 'feel it'. The following three Australian directors make this point. Jo Lane says, "when it's working I feel it's working and I know it's working. So the heart and the head are both having an excellent time" (Sergi 2011). Solrun Hoaas expresses a similar approach, "But I didn't call 'cut', I just let it happen, and when I saw the rushes I just knew that that worked" (Sergi 2011). As does Tom Cowan, "I know because it's natural ... I personally get a feeling of elation. I know it when I see it ... It looks like someone looks like when they're telling the truth" (Sergi 2011). However, there is more going on than simply subjective sensing. Hopgood says:

I can only imagine I have reached the point that he imagined the character should reach ... I can't really answer that question, except to say, that they either know you've given the best performance they're likely to get out of you [or they don't]. (Hopgood quoted in Sergi 2011)

Wickert believes that directors seek to realise that which they ‘imagined’ and Lane says she has to imagine the scene fully realised before she can shoot it (Sergi 2011). Director Oscar Williams says very much the same thing “You have an idea of what it’s going to look like, what you want to do. And because you have an idea of what you want to see, you shoot it that way” (Oscar Williams quoted in Sherman 1976, p.6).

McConachie and Hart have adapted recent developments in cognitive science to propose alternative understandings of theatrical performance in which they position theatrical performance and communication from the point of view of knowledge acquisition from within an embodied knowledge experience, where knowledge of theatre, actors and performances is acquired through observation and engagement with the performance. They argue that the embodied knowledge of the performance is acquired through sensorimotor, physical, sensual, and social experiences. This is similar to Michael Polanyi’s notion of evolving tacit knowledge. McConachie and Hart structure their argument around the work of “cognitive linguist George Lakoff and cognitive philosopher Mark Johnson [who] adopt an epistemological position of ‘embodied realism’ [and] reject both objectivist and relativist epistemologies for a qualified form of realism ... for Lakoff and Johnson, assumption-free observations are not possible” (McConachie and Hart 2006, p.xi): each practitioner’s observations are unique to them.

Therefore, it is worth exploring whether a director’s comprehension of an actor’s performance is a form of embodied knowledge acquisition, embedded within their unique body of tacit knowledge regarding performance, and achieved through a highly developed form of acute perception. Nellhaus, along with McConachie and Hart, also seeks to understand “theatre [as] a model of social agency [within a] communication framework” (Nellhaus 2006, p.92). Their application of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodied consciousness, through cognitive science and critical realism’s notion of embodied knowledge, appears to mirror how directors describe the viewing and experiencing of an actor’s performance. For as McConachie and Hart point out, “Critical realism recognizes the key role of embodied knowledge as a foundation of people’s knowledge of the world; but it also points to the enormous amount of knowledge people necessarily gain second-hand via discursive practices” (McConachie and Hart 2006, p.10).

Within performance this seems to point to an understanding of what is and is not ‘believably authentic human behaviour’. This alludes to Milne’s notion of ‘emotional experience’ as a key requisite of the conscientious director (Milne 1922, p.18). One of the activities that may be occurring when a director is comprehending an actor’s performance is that they are evaluating what they see and hear the actor doing against their internally generated, pre-constructed mental projections of what the performance should look, sound, and most importantly, be emotionally expressed. These projections are the result of collaborating with the actor on the development of the performance during rehearsals, as well as through the process of the director imagining the actor’s performance within their known context of ‘believably authentic human behaviour’. As Lakoff and Johnson point out:

Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p.17)

Consequently, one of the key mental and bodily actions that a director engages in is what Lakoff and Johnson described as ‘empathetic projection’, where the director, consciously or unconsciously, projects their personal values and their unique embodied knowledge onto the actor as the actor is performing, by both imagining and experiencing what they believe the actor is experiencing. Thus, the director who is spectating from a position of privilege, and who also knows that what they are witnessing is a fiction, is yet able to evaluate the actor’s performance against their previously imagined image schema. They can also empathetically project themselves into the situation that the actor is experiencing and allow the reality of the actor’s emotional and psycho-physiological expressions to affect their subjective emotional state. This is similar to what Mark Seton identifies in his search for the “intangible quality of experience between actors and audience” (Seton 2004, p.3).

As Hart posits, “The more visceral the appeal ... the more it resonates throughout a given spectator’s inventory of embodied knowledge” (Hart 2006, p.43). How some directors react to this empathetic projection seems to play a significant role in their determination of the merits of the actor’s performance. For as Enticott et al discovered, there is a close correlation between how well an individual is able to interpret another person’s emotional facial expressions and the degree of mirror neuron activity in their brain (Enticott 2008).

Their study showed that people who have greater mirror neuron activity are better able to distinguish another person's facial emotional expressions, which therefore increases their ability to more accurately interpret that person's intentions, and consequently evoke empathy. Their work has been supported by Fairchild et al (2010) who discovered in their psychiatric research into adolescent females⁴ with conduct disorder, that the size of the insula and amygdala regions of the brain, which manage empathy and emotional perception, can vary significantly in individuals.

Fairchild's research appears to suggest that not everyone is able to correctly distinguish another person's emotional state, or empathise with them and their situation. This ability to recognise emotions, interpret actions and comprehend how other people are feeling seems to differ across the population. This may go some way towards explaining why some people are able to better respond to and distinguish the emotions expressed by actors, or even, perhaps, why some people consider certain actors better performers than others.

This appears to be the point that Hopgood makes when he says that when he is performing he can "feel a level of excitement coming back [from the director]" (Sergi 2011), and Jo Campbell, who states that as a director, "It's a sort of abstract thing that happens. You feel a greater connection to whatever is happening at that immediate time" (Sergi 2011). This belief that some kind of psychological and emotion connection occurs between director and actor during a performance appears to be supported by Hart's view, "that the language of a performance is itself sufficiently isomorphic with the embodied structures within the minds of speakers and listeners to inspire a *coupling* with those structures" (Hart 2006, p.43).

Furthermore, for the actors and directors interviewed, being able to perceive the actor actively listening during a performance also appears to be a key indicator of the actor living in the moment. Mills believes she can clearly see if the actor is actively listening, (Sergi 2011). Sarell agrees, "One of the things that I'm watching for very closely is, are they listening and are they hearing what's coming in, and are they processing it, and are they therefore now making their next choice about what they're going to say next" (Sergi 2011). Both of these directors are indirectly expressing that they have developed acute perception with regards to actor performance.

Some directors credit considerable significance authentic listening, because when they speak of unauthentic performances one of the key indicators they often cite is actors who are not truly listening, but are simply waiting to hear their next dialogue cue, so they can deliver their next line of dialogue. Therefore, an actor, who is in the moment and living the reality of the scene is actively listening and being genuinely affected by, and reacting to, the other actor. When actors perform in this manner they create a unified circle of action and reaction that continuously builds until the scene ends:

... the consistent, essential ingredients always entail behaving, listening, and reacting in an understandable and believable way within the parameters of a specific work. (Carson 2006, p.60)

This ability of an actor to be genuinely affected by the actions of the other actor is something that directors believe they can perceive and register. For Wickert this is part of the evidence that he needs to see in order to be convinced that the actor is portraying complex human behaviour:

The most important thing is can I see complex human behaviour ... Am I capturing an authentic human behaviour that the audience will recognise and be drawn towards and hopefully empathise with ... The purpose for me is to get audiences to recognise and empathise. (Wickert quoted in Sergi 2011)

For Mills a complex duality occurs during the performance. She believes that actors are not so much working as an actor, because she loathes seeing acting, but rather they are working as themselves:

When an actor works with another actor, they're not working as characters. They're working as 'themselves' in a sense and the words are secondary. So they don't have to make the words work, and they don't have to give emotion to any of the words. All they have to do is affect this other person and be affected by the other person. And that's how I think it works. (Mills quoted in Sergi 2011)

Robert Altman makes a similar point, "What I'm looking for instead of actors is behaviours." (Altman quoted in Sherman 1976, p.161). As does Michael Winner, "Now Marlon [Brando] took that [theatrical] acting and turned it into film acting, which is really behaving" (Winner quoted in Sherman 1976, p.162).

This notion that quality film acting is more about how the actor behaves than their ability to act was picked up by John Ellis, who wrote, “Underperformance is not a question of restraint or lack of histrionics. It is a question of producing the effect of behaving rather than performing” (Ellis 1992, p.104). This was developed by Paul Coughlin who pointed out that one of the elements of ‘authentic’ acting is to be found in the link between sociology and acting, because “capturing character requires an imitation not of character but of behaviour”. (Coughlin 2008, p.243)

However, within this constant play of action and reaction in creating behaviour lies a trap for the actor, because the amount of time it takes for an action to occur and for the actor to be affected and react can be very quick, by which time the other actor should have moved on and new actions are happening. As Peggy Phelan points out, it is helpful to think of “performance as that which disappears” (Phelan 2003, p.293). So the amount of time an actor holds onto a moment of action or reaction, a moment of seeking to affect and be affected, has a very real impact on the flow of a scene. If an actor holds onto a moment for too long before moving onto the next moment then the natural flow of the scene might be interrupted and in narrative terms the audience may move ahead of the actor. Mills makes this exact point:

Another difficulty with actors playing the action dutifully is that when they get affected, and a moment of their being affected happens, then they can't hang onto it. They've got to let it go. And that's in a sense the truthfulness of the moment. That's as long as it lasts. (Mills quoted in Sergi 2011)

A look, a glance, a thought, a gasp, a frown, a shudder can be over in less than a second and once it has occurred a space exists for a new moment, which the audience is already looking for the actor to fill. As both István Szabó, and Ralph Fiennes say, seeing the birth of a new emotion on the face of an actor is for them the most important moment in the performance (Berlinale 2011, video available via web). Or what Mills alludes to when she recounts how one director once told her to, “Just think it. That's all you need to do”, because the camera will find the external reaction to the thought in her eyes, across her face and possibly her whole body (Sergi 2011). This is constantly happening in an authentic performance. As Cate Blanchett says, “in film acting you're often encouraged to find internal connections and the camera will find your performance” (Blanchett quoted in Porton 2007, p.19). Hopgood makes the same point, “You can tell instantly when you see a performer like that. They just say – I'm going to live. Bring the camera to me and I'll live. And you catch me living it” (Sergi 2011).

However, the director must not only be sufficiently literate in reading expressed emotions in order to interpret their intentions, but they must have the ability to perceive the minute details of the actor's performance with great clarity. This ability to perceive subtle nuance, to have acute perception, is a fundamental factor to comprehending the actor's performance, for as Steven Katz says, "In the arts, technique is largely a matter of improved perception. In music, for example, this means learning to hear more accurately; in film it means learning to see more precisely" (Katz 1991, p. 173). This ability to have a heightened sense of perception appears fundamental to comprehending the full complexity of an actor's performance. During the making of *Tom & Viv* (Gilbert 1994) Miranda Richardson praised director Brian Gilbert for being confident in what he saw in her performance. In other words she praised him for his acute perception (Zucker 1997). Meryl Streep makes a similar point regarding working on *Fantastic Mr Fox* (Anderson 2009):

He's very demanding (says Streep of Wes Anderson). He hears everything, even a quasi-breath ... It's more like working with a composer, as if he was hearing music inside his head and you couldn't hear it. (Streep quoted in Teeman 2009, p17)

Streep goes on to discuss how she too looks deeply when she is seeking the essence of human behaviour:

I like observing behaviour and what catches the eye, what makes us read each other so closely. Ever since movies began we have read each other more closely ... we see too deeply into each other, even as our understanding seems shallower and shallower. To see deeply you have to look deeply and feel where you are. (Streep quoted in Teeman 2009, p.17)

Eleanor Coppola believes that Francis Ford Coppola's talent lay in his acute perception:

Francis works by getting the emotion of the scene going and asking the camera to capture it...His talent is the ability to discriminate, the ability to see a moment of truthful acting and distinguish it from all the others. (Coppola 1993, p. 121+138)

Although Sydney Pollack did not believe acute perception could be taught, for him it is a fundamental tool that a quality director has to have:

If a director cannot tell the difference between a fake bit of behaviour and a true bit of behaviour, they have no business directing. It's not something that can be learned. You have to know the difference between truth and fiction ... That's all you have, as a director, the ability to recognize reality in behaviour. (Pollack quoted in Stevens 1997, p.26).

Director Buzz Kulik believed that the genius of William Wyler, who according to Kulik often had difficulty articulating performance notes to actors, was that he had acute perception, “... his genius was that when he saw what it was like ... he recognized it, which is an incredible thing” (Buzz Kulik quoted in Sherman 1976, p.163). Jean Renoir is quite blunt about this aspect of directing:

The trouble with us human beings is that we are often very stupid. Things are in front of us, we don't see them. An actress rehearses with a beautiful face full of emotion — you don't see it. You think of your camera angle. I'm not for that. (Renoir quoted in Sherman 1976, p.190)

Acute perception allows the director to go beyond simply comprehending the actor's performance on an emotional and psychological level, and to actually see the details of the external expressions of the performance and evaluate the authenticity of those individual elements that define the behaviour. According to Mills, when this occurs the director is able to distinguish tangible aspects of the actor's performance:

It's something about the sensitivity of a director with their actors. I guess a bit of experience and knowledge ... And that's very fine. Quite subtle in some ways, even though it's [the performance] really strong and powerful. (Mills quoted in Sergi 2011)

Mills goes on to highlight several external actions that she believes are some of the primary indicators of an authentic performance and once the director develops acute perception they begin to observe these elements that remain somewhat invisible to the untrained eye:

There are lots of different signs. The time's gone, and the scene is over very quickly. The energy moves back and forward between the actors in a way that seems seamless and easy. The attention of the actors is quite focused, but not in a tense way. In an almost relaxed way, even if it is a tense scene. The actors are bang in the middle of their bodies. Bang in the middle of what they're doing with each other. So even if there are pauses, there is still movement and flow between them ... I can say it's something to do with their breathing. It seems to be continuous. And something in their faces change. It's sort of like a continual change. Or something in the eyes is quite alive. (Sergi 2011)

As previously discussed, for many directors their primary centre of comprehension is located within themselves and how they experience the actor's performance, rather than being dually focused by including their perceptive observations of myriad aspects of the actor's behaviour that combined together to become the performance.

However, I suspect that capable directors do pick up on these minute aspects of psycho-physiological behaviour, but they do so in a way that is difficult for them to realise and verbalise. Their knowledge of these subtle details exists to a significant extent as tacit knowledge that has been acquired over time and with conscious experience, and much trial and error.

Thus, directors come to comprehend an actor's performance by utilising their sensorimotor apparatus, which is influenced by their mirror neurons, and the insula and amygdala regions of their brain. This combines with Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied consciousness and Hart's notion of kinaesthetic and perceptual interactions through which they 'comprehend' what experience and training as directors enables them to 'acutely perceive'. To this they add what they 'respond' to emotionally, psychologically and intellectually and what they 'connect to' through Lakoff and Johnson's notion of empathetic projection. And all this is operates alongside their individually acquired store of distinctive tacit knowledge of acting, performance, cinema, society and most importantly authentic human behaviour, or Milne's notion of emotional experience, and the unique socio-cultural, historical, geographical, educational and genetic aspects that make them the individuals they are.

As outlined in the introduction, although the actor/director relationship is essentially collaborative, which enables them as a creative team to explore the psycho-physiological foundations of the character, and the character's emotional journey throughout the film, there nevertheless comes a time on a film set, when the camera is rolling, where both the actor and director must discharge their duties individually. The actor must act, and the director must direct, which at this particular instance requires the director to evaluate the actor's performance on their own without any direct input from the actor or any other member of the film crew.

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End Notes

¹ Settling on the most appropriate word to place in the middle of the words 'how directors ... an actor's performance' was one of the most difficult challenges of writing this paper. This paper is not about how directors rehearse with actors, nor is it about the criteria that directors use to judge an actor's performance. But rather it is an exploration concerning what is occurring within the director during that very short period of time when the director is being a spectator to the actor's performance. Words such as 'read', 'know', 'evaluate', 'understand', 'perceive', 'judge' etc were all considered, but discarded. In the end I felt the word 'comprehend' was the least incorrect.

² In this paper quotes cited as (Sergi 2011) refer to a series of filmed interviews, edited in a documentary fashion, that were submitted as part of my Doctor of Creative Arts thesis titled *At The Moment of Creation* conducted through the University of Technology Sydney. A DVD of this documentary resides with the bound thesis in the Library of the University of Technology Sydney.

³ Butler, Jeremy G., ed. *Star Text: Image and Performance in Film and Television*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1991.

⁴ Both Fairchild and Calder, et al have recently written a paper which is to be published in the American Journal of Psychiatry, titles, *Brain structure abnormalities in early-onset and adolescence-onset Conduct Disorder*, that show similar results in adolescent males. Please see this website <http://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/bibliography/articles/7213/> accessed 1 April 2011.