Metaphors We Act By: Kinesthetics, Cognitive Psychology, and Historical Structures

Bruce A. McConachie

"The [Actor's] Studio is close to the roots of our time."
William Inge

I

At the climax of the "Poker Night" scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Marlon Brando howeled a plea that echoed and amplified the prototypical Misunderstood Male in the culture of post-war America. The explosion of emotion behind his "STELLLAHHHHH!" seemed to comunicate immediately and viscerally to theatregoers (and later to moviegoers), who sought similar experiences in the frustrated-sensitive-loner characterizations of James Dean, Paul Newman, and others from the late 1940s through the early '60s. But how exactly did audiences make sense of Brando's moment on stage? How does the actor's use of his or her body help to shape the perceptions and understandings produced by spectators? And what do these kinesthetically generated meanings have to do with the construction and reproduction of culture? How, in other words, are kinesthetics, psychology, and historical structures linked together?

At stake in the theoretical controversies surrounding this question is the potential agency of the body in history. The dominant tendency of western science since the Enlightenment has been to understand the body as one among many physical objects in the universe, thus reducing it to a passive recipient of external and internal forces and drives. As sociologist Paul Connerton remarks, the "linguistic turn" of recent scholarship has reinforced this tendency: "When the defining feature of the human species was seen as language, the body was 'readable' as a text or code, but the body is regarded as the arbitrary bearer of meanings; bodily practices are acknowledged, but in an etherealized form" (101). In conventional versions of semiotic and Foucauldian analysis, for example, the

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body is a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which culture inscribes meaning. But is "inscription" an appropriate metaphor for understanding bodies in history?

The problematics of kinesthetics and history are particularly crucial for the cogency and practice of new historicism. This approach to historical explanation is grounded on Nietzsche's understanding that our classificatory systems of knowledge antedate our corporeal existence; consequently, historical agency resides finally in discourse, not bodies. I believe that there is much in new historicism, specifically Stephen Greenblatt's practice of it, that can lead to productive ways of thinking about and writing the history of performance. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, however, has aptly criticized new historicism for its failure to account for and include the dynamics of historical structures, specifically issues of agency and cultural hegemony. Because they emphasize textual systems over historical structures, Greenblatt and his new historicist colleagues have no theoretical guidelines to help them determine which of the metaphorical systems they are investigating were historically super- or sub-ordinate in their societies. Fox-Genovese adds that "the very notion of textuality in the large sense embodies the insistence on system, interconnection, and seamlessness, and therefore leads inescapably to what [Fredric] Jameson calls totalization. That recognition is compelling, but it rests upon a denial of boundaries" (218).[1]

To avoid the problem of totalization, Fox-Genovese calls for historians to write structural history:

> By structural, I mean that history must disclose and reconstruct the conditions of consciousness and action, with conditions understood as systems of social relations, including relations between women and men, between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless; among those of different faiths, different races, and different classes. I further mean that at any given moment, systems of relations operate in relation to a dominant tendency—for example, what Marxists call a mode of production—that endows them with structure. Both in the past and in the interpretation of the past, history follows a pattern or structure, according to which some systems of relations and some events possess greater significance than others (217-18).

I share Fox-Genovese's desire to fold systems of discourse into historical structures and believe that her historiographical program may be enhanced by an epistemology which recognizes the embodiedness of human understanding. Such an approach is particularly suited to the history of performance because it foregrounds the physical actions of the performer.

The title of my essay borrows deliberately from a 1980 study, *Metaphors We Live By*, by "experiential realists" George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Lakoff and Johnson implicitly challenge historiographical approaches that privilege language and systems over bodies and structures as the stuff of history. My chief historical example in linking their insights to the dynamics of performative meaning is the relationship established between actors trained in The Method and audiences eager to validate their experience of post-war culture in the theatre. In brief, Strasberg educated actors to understand and use their bodies as "containers," an image schemata that provided a kinesthetic model for Americans in the 1950s.[2] Lakoff and Johnsons' experiential realism invites theatre historians to trace the domination of specific modes of embodiment as a part of the production and maintenance of theatrical formations and the historical cultures in which they flourished.

II

Issues of embodiment, meaning, and cultural production have long been points of controversy between semioticians and phenomenologists writing about the theatre. Any discussion that hopes to advance a new approach to historical explanation involving meaning-making by audiences must begin by locating it in the context of these ongoing debates.

Semioticians and phenomenologists disagree about the nature of the impression actors make on the perceptions of the audience. Most semioticians, following the work of Kier Elam and Patrice Pavis, understand theatrical communication as the confluence of at least two sign systems, referential and performant. Referential signs, which abound in spoken dialogue, focus the spectators on the fictitious world of the play. Performant signs, however, pull the audience out of their involvement in the dramatic story and into a delight (or disappointment) with the presence and skill of the actors on the stage. While the referential and performant sign systems of a production may be closely aligned, spectators cannot use both systems simultaneously to make sense of its stage images. Audience members may and usually do combine these separate signs to understand their experience, but theatrical communication provides no overarching semiotic system that facilitates their attempt at synthesis. From a semiotic point of view, spectators understood Brando's "STELLA!" as both an expression of the actor's virtuosity and as an important development in the unfolding of *Streetcar*'s plot.

The result of these different decoding processes is "genuine informational polyphony," as Roland Barthes noted in 1964 (258), the elaboration on stage of a carnaval of signs from distinct systems that invites spectators to interpret what

they see and hear in a variety of ways. The disjuncture between Brando's domination of crucial scenes on stage and the role of Stanley Kowalski in the plot troubled the critic Harold Clurman, for example, because it pulled the meanings of the production in two different directions.   "Brando's innate quality and something unresolved in the director's concept make the scene moving in a way that is thematically disruptive," wrote Clurman. "It is not integrated with that attribute of the play which requires that Kowalski at all times be somewhat vile" (Kazan 351). Most semioticians agree, however, that spectators usually integrate (or overlook) such disparities to make coherent sense of their theatrical experience.[3]

In general, phenomenologists object that semioticians murder spectator perception to dissect it. Citing phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Bert States implicitly rejects the referential-performant distinction: "It is impossible . . . to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts" (7). For States, spectators see and hear the actor simultaneously as both character and performer; the experience is a gestalt.   An actor's moment on stage, says States, is "a single aural-visual event. It would not be a question of two languages coming together into a unity but of a single motive pervading the actor's body and producing speech and movement" (138). Reading States' into an interpretation of Brando's signature moment in *Streetcar*, the audience would have focused on the star's body as a channel for the expression of both the actor's virtuosity and the character's emotions in Williams' play.

States builds his insights on Bruce Wilshire's elucidation of the embodied nature of the actor-audience relationship in his *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*.   We watch actors, believes Wilshire, "to give release to our primal mimetic absorptions in types of doing and being" (23). At their most basic level, these absorptions are socially kinesthetic: "One becomes aware of what one's body already is: something modelled on others mimetically" (25). Theatrical mimesis gives spectators back to themselves, helping them to complete and extend their kinesthetic self understanding.   "The bodily and communal fictive variation that is theatre supplies me with the communally constituted missing parts of my own experiencing body" (26), says Wilshire. He might have noted that Brando's Stanley made possible the combination of a vulgar aggressiveness on the outside and a vulnerable innocence on the inside for his American spectators. Thus playgoing, for Wilshire, serves a vital social-psychological function: by identifying with actors, spectators become aware of the social construction of their own bodies, experience themselves as an "other," and consequently achieve significant individuation. As occurs in watching sports

events but with greater social-historical range and psychological depth, theatregoing socializes and individuates through the body.

Paul Connerton extends Wilshire's kinesthetic phenomenology into the realms of social memory and historical structures. Demonstrating that people's experience of the present depends upon their knowledge of the past, Connerton shows that images of the past are best conveyed and maintained through "incorporating" practices wherein cultural messages ranging from postural behavior to religious obedience are conveyed through physical actions. These performances, says Connerton, constitute a "mnemonics of the body" (74), generally insuring the preservation of traditional structures of super- and sub-ordination. Because performing habits of incorporation (eg., shaking hands with another person) requires kinesthetic memory but no abstract mental categories, Connerton objects to interpreting habits in terms of a linguistic system. The meaning of any incorporating practice, he states, "cannot be reduced to a sign which exists on a separate 'level' outside the immediate sphere of the body's acts" (95).[4] In the theatre, Connerton's "mnemonics of the body" works in the same ways to maintain kinesthetic systems and, through them, historical structures.

Unfortunately, neither Wilshire's nor Connerton's study explains the cognitive processes underlying the kinesthetics of theatrical communication. To comprehend the psychology of cognition during playwatching, for example, Wilshire must extrapolate from a 1950 work by Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, which, Wilshire admits, confuses phenomenological with behavioristic approaches. But his main difficulty is explaining how spectators experienced embodied images and sounds emanating from actors on the stage as a gestalt. Audiences in the presence of Brando-Stanley shouting "Stella!" somehow connected this impression with more basic categories of perception, thought, action, and speech that they brought with them to the theatre. But what were these more basic categories of cognition, facilitating, indeed determining, a coherent and unified process of perception and understanding? Like States after him, Wilshire provides persuasive examples and logical explanations for his assertion that audience cognition is actually a gestalt, but neither can point to recent experiments in cognitive psychology which might substantiate their claim. Without such evidence concerning the basic categories and mechanisms of cognition, their explanations for the socially constitutive function of theatregoing lack substantial support. Lakoff and Johnsons' experiential realism provides a firm foundation, plus several strong stories, to undergird their phenomenological position.

III

In their recent review essay of Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* and Johnson's *The Body in the Mind*, Tracy Henley and Michael Johnson conclude that both books, viewed together, "may be among the most significant contributions in philosophy, psychology, and linguistics to have appeared in years" (250). As the reviewers note, the works nicely complement each other, Lakoff's focused on the experimental basis for their assertions and Johnson's concerned with the epistemological implications of their position. Henley and Johnson link both books to traditions in philosophy and psychology that include Wittgenstein's interest in primitive bodily experience, Vygotsky's marriage of cognition and social interaction, Piaget's emphasis on mental schemata in human development, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological psychology, and more recently, John Searle's concept of "background" in speech acts. At the same time, the reviewers praise Lakoff and Johnson's unique and substantial contributions in helping to resolve the crisis among current theories of cognition, meaning, and rationality.

In the early chapters of *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, Lakoff summarizes the experimental basis for his later assertions. How human beings categorize their perceptions to create meaning has been the fundamental question animating this research. In experiments that seem to validate aspects of Peter Brooks's intercultural theatre productions, for example, Paul Ekman and others demonstrated the existence of basic categories of human emotions uniformly expressed across cultures in the muscles of the face and torso. Synthesizing much of the work that had gone before her, Eleanor Rosch was the first to understand categorization itself as the primary issue in the psychology of cognition. Her experiments challenged the classical notion that all members of a category of thought would have psychologically equal status within that category. People asked to judge chickens, robins, and ostriches, for example, as members of the category of "bird" should, under classical theory, find them all equally representative. Instead, subjects chose "prototypical" members of each category (robins, in the above example), exposing a troubling gap between the classical notion of categorization and the conclusions of cognitive science. Lakoff's own experiments confirm Rosch's findings about prototypes and basic level categories, widening the gap between classical objectivism and experiential realism into a canyon.[5]

In both of their 1987 books, Lakoff and Johnson mount a substantial attack on classical objectivism. In brief, objectivism assumes that there exists a transcendent, correct, "God's-Eye" view of reality, a perspective that must provide

the basis for all human knowledge. For objectivists, meaning is abstract, deriving from rational operations connecting mental representations to each other or to phenomena in a reality outside of the mind. Correct reasoning joins concepts together to form propositions of various kinds through a limited number of logical connectives. The concepts "Brando" and "stage," for example, may form the proposition "Brando is on the stage," which may then be extended logically to "if Brando is on stage, then he is not in the audience." Hence, objectivist reasoning is propositional. It is also disembodied. Drawing on the Cartesian and Kantian traditions of philosophy, objectivism assumes a split in human experience between the mind and the body which segregates the physical processes of sensation and perception from the mental operations involved in making meaning. "Brando is on the stage," objectivists might assert, not because our brains have evolved to construct meaning in certain ways, but because any mind in the universe could deduce this conclusion, regardless of its physical abilities to sense and explain. Lakoff and Johnson find objectivism alive and well in computer models of the brain, Chomskyan linguistics, and many other approaches to cognitive psychology.

Countering objectivism with experiential realism, Johnson states that "any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp the world" (xiii). For Lakoff and Johnson, these structures are the basic-level categories discerned by Rosch and others, plus "image schemata." They define a schemata as "a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience" (Johnson, xiv). The source-path-goal schema, for instance, which humans know kinesthetically at an early age by moving from a starting point to an end point, structures certain events in our experience as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

Unlike the conceptual building blocks of objectivism, image schemata are nonpropositional and figurative. The source-path-goal schema, for example, is not an abstract, subject-predicate structure (such as "Brando is on the stage") that specifies certain conditions of truth that can be satisfied by looking at reality (eg., to see if Brando really is on the stage). Rather, the image schema exists as an ongoing mechanism in our understanding which comes between perception and conception. Propositional knowledge can still be accommodated within experiential realism, however, as kinds of statements which fit within schematic understanding; they are simply no longer the foundations of epistemology. Indeed, 'linguistic meaning' itself, says Johnson, "is only an instance or specification of meaningfulness in general"(176). Both authors also understand schematas as figurative; that is, relations among their parts may be charted by

simple line drawings. As a figure, the source-path-goal schema is an arrow drawn from point A and ending at point B. Both the figurative and nonpropositional characteristics of image schemata place them beyond the pale of objectivist theory.

From Lakoff and Johnsons' point of view, the science of semiotics also suffers from objectivism. Semiotic statements of truth are propositional and abstract; they admit of no psychological structures intervening between the perceived signifier and the conceived signified. Once the spectator understands the abstract code connecting the material signifier on stage to the concept to which it refers, she or he can combine them with other signs to make sense of the play. This process rests on establishing an abstract, disembodied relationship between signs and objective, extra-mental reality, the hallmark of classical objectivism. Although most semioticians would disavow the possibility of achieving a "God's-Eye" view of reality, semiotics, lacking any notion of basic level categories or image schematas, backs into an objectivist view of meaning and reasoning.

For Lakoff and Johnson, preconceptual image schematas structure a variety of fundamental actions, perceptions, and events. They have noted and discussed several dozen of these schemata, including "link," "balance," "force," and "container." "Links" structure our experience of causal connection. "Balancing" gives coherence to visual perception, among other things. The "force" schema helps us to understand how we act on our environment or are acted upon by it. Our experience of our bodies as three-dimensional containers, with an inside and an outside, structures much of our orientation in space. Johnson's illustration of this in-out schema points up its ubiquity in our everyday lives:

> Consider, for example, only a few of the many *in-out* orientations that might occur in the first few minutes of an ordinary day. You wake *out* of a deep sleep and peer *out* from beneath the covers *into* you room. You gradually emerge *out* of your stupor, pull yourself *out* from under the covers, climb *into* your robe, stretch *out* your limbs, and walk *in* a daze *out* of the bedroom and *into* the bathroom (30).

In Lakoff's and Johnson's understanding, the above experiences would be impossible without a container schemata to organize and connect them. Even the kind of formal, propositional reasoning necessary in mathematics could not occur, notes Lakoff, without image schemata to facilitate it (222-27). As Johnson insists, schemata are the "primary means by which we construct or constitute order and are not mere passive receptacles into which experience is poured" (30).

In their internal structures, image schemata are coherent and unified wholes;

we experience them as gestalts.   Experiments by Rosch and others validating prototype theory, notes Lakoff, have found that "certain clusters of conditions are more basic to human experience than other clusters and also more basic than individual conditions in the cluster" (489). Consequently, these schematas are "experiential gestalts," the wholes of which are psychologically simpler than their parts (Lakoff 489). The gestalt nature of image schemas derives from their origin in common physical action: humans learn at an early age, for instance, that they can balance their bodies and that there is a difference between their insides and the rest of the world.   Primal balancing and containing are experienced kinesthetically as gestalts and are thereafter available as schematas of balance and containment to structure similar experiences in the same way. Johnson concedes that "experiential basicness is a relative matter. Yet," he adds, "because our bodies are very much alike with respect to their physiological nature, we would expect to find commonly shared (if not universal) gestalt structures for many of our physical interactions with our environment" (62).

The gestalt nature of image schemata tends to validate the phenomenological point of view of Bert States, Paul Connerton, and Bruce Wilshire regarding the experience of an audience at the theatre.   Spectators watching Brando shout "Stella!" would experience a gestalt, according to the psychology of Lakoff and Johnson, because an image schemata would structure their comprehension of the event. In this particular case, the schemata of containment probably interceded between most spectators' perception and their understanding, since the explosive force of Brando's plea came out of a body writhing in anguish and frustration. Of course the validity of this line of reasoning depends on historical evidence that spectators in the late '40s were likely to understand actors' bodies as containers of emotions.

Lakoff and Johnson's explanation of metaphorical systems as linked to the construction and reproduction of culture provides a way into this line of reasoning. As they assert, the process of cognition uses image schematas directly or extends them through metonomy and metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson discard the objectivist notion that metaphors are simply figures of speech reducible to literal propositions. Objectivists would reduce the metaphor "lust is hunger," for instance, to a statement that the concept of lust and the concept of hunger are alike in certain respects. Instead, Lakoff and Johnson insist that metaphors are irreducible and "play a constitutive role in the structuring of our experience" (Johnson 73).   Metaphors do this by crossing the boundaries of basic categories—in the above example, by blurring literal distinctions between sexual desire and digestive appetite. Using an image schemata as a basis, metaphors map one concept onto another from a different category.   Metaphorical expressions such as "You make my blood boil" and "She was seething with rage"

rely on the container schemata to understand the body as a cauldron of the emotions and then translate the concept of heat onto the concept of anger (Lakoff 380-415). Although metaphors draw fundamentally on physical experience through image schemata, they cross conceptual boundaries to blend kinesthetic knowledge with cultural, linguistic, and historical understanding.

In this way metaphors provide much of the basis for cultural tension and cohesion among social groups. The structure of metaphorical systems dominant in any group, built up through frequently deployed image schemata, constrain their construction of reality. These systems, states Johnson, "establish a range of possible patterns of understanding and reasoning. They are like channels in which something can move with a certain limited, relative freedom. Some movements [i.e., some inferential meanings] are not possible at all. They are ruled out by the image schemata and metaphors" (137). In effect, image schemata and their metaphors help to constitute what Fox-Genovese calls "the conditions of consciousness and action" (217) among different social groups in history.

Beyond the reproduction of conventional meanings within social groups, metaphors can create new understandings and, consequently, new realities. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson note that "much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones. For example, the Westernization of cultures throughout the world is partly a matter of introducing the 'time is money' metaphor into those cultures" (145). Metaphorical systems and their parent schemata both constrain and change historical cultures.

IV

The above discussion opens the way for investigating a particular conjunction of actors and audiences in the same historical culture. While no analysis can ever prove that most audience members were experiencing certain feelings and ideas when they enjoyed a group of actors, historical reconstruction, in tandem with theoretical understanding, can point to the likelihood of such experiences. How actors and audience members made meaning through their bodies—in particular, how they relied on certain metaphors and image schemata to construct their understandings—will be a key question in these investigations. While the historian might begin with either actors or audiences, an initial focus on the discourse and practice of acting in a particular period makes sense because of the specificity of available information.

It may seem that the container schemata is such a "natural" way of comprehending our physicality that all other constructions would be secondary

or even superfluous. Historically, however, cultures have constructed the human body through a variety of primary metaphors and schemata. In the eighteenth century, the up-down schema, deriving from thousands of daily activities and perceptions relating to the experience of verticality, typically structured physicality as hierarchy. Numerous plays and such acting texts as James Burgh's *The Art of Speaking* encouraged performers on the stage and off to achieve self-mastery by subordinating low, selfish passions to the dictates of high, enlightened reason (Roach 99-118). Early in the twentieth century, Meyerhold and the Futurists used the force schemata and its metaphorical extension, the machine, to constitute the bodily movements of workers and actors. Brecht relied on the process schemata, encouraging his actors to use their bodies to facilitate a systematic series of actions directed toward eventual understanding and action from the audience.

The Method's construction of the bodies of actors and spectators as containers is just as culturally embedded as the above schematas and metaphors. This is not to say, of course, that these historical orientations to the body excluded other metaphors and schemas from their discourse. Acting texts from Burgh to Strasberg used metaphors from a wide range of schematas to constitute and explain emotion, gesture, and the actor-audience relationship. But it is to claim that certain schemata have gained dominance in culturally constructed images of the body in specific cultures and historical periods.

Because every schemata has a distinctive internal logic, certain consequences follow from the relations among its parts. Containment, for example, involves necessary relations among an inside, an outside, and a boundary between them. Johnson summarizes five entailments that derive from this figuration:

> (i) The experience of containment typically involves protection from, or resistance to, external forces. When eyeglasses are *in* a case, they are protected against forceful impacts. (ii) Containment also limits and restricts forces within the container. When I am *in* a room or *in* a jacket, I am restrained in my forceful movements. (iii) Because of this restraint of forces, the contained object gets a relative fixity of location. For example, the fish gets located *in* the fishbowl. The cup is held *in* the hand. (iv) This relative fixing of location within the container means that the contained object becomes either accessible or inaccessible to the view of some observer. It is either held so that it can be observed or else the container itself blocks or hides the object from view. (v) Finally, we experience transitivity of containment. If B is *in* A, then whatever is *in* B is also *in* A. If I am *in* my bed and my bed is *in* my room, then I am also *in* my room (22).

These five entailments provide a convenient framework for organizing an understanding of Method acting within the audience's experience of post-war culture from the point of view of experiential cognitive psychology.

To take the third entailment first, Lee Strasberg's Method fixed the location and reality of the true self for his actors. "An actor must deal with deep, firm things inside himself," he said (quoted in Vineberg 104). Vivica Lindfors claimed that Strasberg taught her to use her "inner life as a tool. He helped me to organize my chaos" (Adams 212). As Jack Garfein stated in another container metaphor, Strasberg made every actor at the Studio feel he had "great inner treasures" (Hirsch 167). Many of Strasberg's most notable exercises, including personalization and affective memory, assumed the reality of a inner self, less conscious but more genuine than the mask worn on the outside for public purposes. In short, for Strasberg, the "inner emotional experience" (Strasberg 19) of every actor was the core of her or his being. Actors who learned how to open this treasure chest and utilize those "deep, firm things inside" could perform with authenticity and sincerity. Actors who did not draw on their true selves to create their roles ran the risk of seeming to lack genuineness and honesty in front of their audiences.

For Strasberg, this was a matter of ethics as well as technique. A letter writer to the *New York Times* "Drama Mailbag" complained in 1956 that "Lee Strasberg and his fellows are always seeking justification for their histrionic theories in the words 'honest' and 'sincere,' adjectives that apply to ethical conduct and not necessarily to the field of esthetics as well" (Strasberg Clipping File, NYPL). In a revealing anecdote, Carroll Baker recalled that when she and other women attended classes at the Studio, they did not wear makeup. "I mean, we were serious," said Baker. "All that was important was our studying" (Adams 218). If truth and authenticity are on the inside, it would be dishonest to paint the outside.

In Strasberg's conception of insides and outsides in the performance event, the inner self of the actor nested inside the character she or he were playing which, in turn, rested within the given circumstances of the dramatic action, while the entire performance on stage occurred within the public arena of a theatre. Many apparent contradictions in Strasberg's language disappear when the transitivity of his containers are recognized. Thus Strasberg can tell Keir Dullea "to learn to live on stage simply and believably, within the logic of your character" in one breath and then urge him "to provide a basis for yourself, of how you would be inside that character" in the next (Hirsch 133). The inner self is always the smallest of these Chinese boxes, but it rests within larger containers to which actors must adjust. When these containers within containers are properly aligned, the walls between them tend to disappear for audiences. Thus

Arthur Penn could say that Method acting can give spectators "a sense of a character's inner life, all radiating from the actor's genuinely personal core" (Hirsch 223). In Strasberg's memory, the containers surrounding Eleanora Duse became transparent as she searchingly revealed the "innermost parts of herself" (Hirsch 146) to American spectators in the 1920s. Her performance glowed from within.

By placing the actor's inner self at the core of the performance event, however, Strasberg valorized the presumed uniqueness of the performer over the larger containers encapsulating it, including the character as constituted by the text. In effect, Strasberg arranged his Chinese boxes in hierarchical order, ranking the smallest and innermost at the top. Norman Mailer noted in wry amusement "how disagreeable" and "even brutal" it was for the Method actor "when his role is not adequate to him, when he cannot act with some subtle variations of his personal style" (Hirsch 112). The largest and outermost of the performance containers, the play as public event, was also the lowest in importance for Strasberg. When actors tried to turn the workshop environment of his Studio toward the performance conditions of a public theatre, he typically reacted with patriarchal vengeance. "How dare you use this place to try to impress us!" he commanded Martin Balsam in the early 1950s (Adams 207). Theodore Hoffman later complained with some justification that many Method actors "really weren't the least bit interested in communicating anything to the audience" (Vineberg 103).

Strasberg drew his understanding of the relation between character and given circumstances, two of his Chinese boxes, from Stanislavski. Natalie Crohn Schmidtt concludes that the Russian actor and theorist

> defined the self in opposition to the world, relating the idea of individuality (and consequently psychology as a whole) to this separateness of the self from the rest of the world and from other persons. The context in which the self operates he called the given circumstances. In Stanislavski's view, the human environment and human identity do not interact, and certainly they are not interpenetrating; instead, the self is a largely autonomous constant, identifiably the same entity from beginning to end. (97)

While Stanislavski emphasized the transitivity relating characters and their given circumstances in the world of the play, Strasberg focused on the containers of self and character. He strove to elide the boundaries separating them through personalization and affective memory exercises, techniques which Stanislavski repudiated. Significantly, Strasberg totally rejected the interpenetration that

occurs among self and character in the acting ideas of Viola Spolin. "Students must see that theatre comes from real things, not from games or make believe," he told *Dramatics* magazine in 1977 (12). Arguably, Strasberg altered Stanislavski's emphasis on the world of the play to substitute the world of the self.

The "real things" of an actor's inner reality, however, are often hidden from normal view. This accords with the fourth entailment of the containment schemata mentioned above by Johnson. One Studio actor spoke of Strasberg's acumen at providing him with techniques "to dig up [his] guts" (Hirsch 212), as though the inner self required extensive mining operations to reveal its treasures. More often, admirers of Strasberg used medical metaphors to describe his ability to penetrate the boundary between the outer and inner self without harming the actor-patient. Robert Hethmon described Strasberg as a man with "the objectivity of a doctor who stands outside the body he is treating" (Vineberg 104). And Cindy Adams believed that Strasberg "x-rays a man's soul" (208). For many observers of the Method, of course, Strasberg-the-doctor became, more specifically, Strasberg-the-psychiatrist, society's sanctioned surgeon of the psyche in the 1950s.

In a different guise (because the metaphors drew on a different entailment of containment), Strasberg also made frequent house calls as an engineer of the emotions. Strasberg "opened the floodgates for me," confessed Eva Marie Saint (Hirsch 168). Because containment limits and constricts the forces within its boundaries, it was linguistically appropriate for Strasberg to understand his work as freeing emotions that were "blocked," "trapped," or otherwise "frustrated." Historian of the Method Foster Hirsch notes Strasberg's use of the "private moment" exercise to "rip through the actor's defenses, release tensions that have built up over the years, and help to free the actor physically and vocally" (Hirsch 138). Strasberg explained his "singing-the-words" exercise as a technique for "control of energy. It starts as a trap; no involuntary impulse can come out. If we stand still and vibrate the voice, things build up inside, you get frustrated, then thought allows impulse to express itself" (Hirsch 143). When the body is understood as a container of feelings, the idea that these emotions may become disruptive and burst out is a consequent entailment.

Of course random erruptions were never Strasberg's goal. In a revealing container metaphor, Strasberg spoke to his students of the actor's unconscious as though it were a "caged bird." "How can we make the bird do what we want? That's our aim here. We cage it, lock it up, train it" (Hirsch 131). Affective memory exercises were one way to train the bird to sing on key and at the right time. Having participated in many of these exercises, one actor noted that she had built up "an emotional filing cabinet" that she had learned "how to draw on

quickly" (Hirsch 211). As master engineer, Strasberg believed he was training his actors not only how to stoke their emotional fires, but also how to channel their head of steam to drive themselves at full throttle down the tracks of their character's actions.

But adversaries always got in the way. The container schemata and its metaphors entails the need to protect those inside the container from forces on the outside. For actors, the biggest external threat to their success envisioned by Strasberg was the audience. Strasberg feared what spectators—those, he said, "beyond the black and terrible hole of the proscenium arch" (Strasberg 50)—could do to an actor's concentration and hence to his art. He cited Stanislavski's understanding of the actor's need to be "private in public" and developed specific exercises to ward off stage fright. In this regard, it is probably not accidental that many of the most successful performances of Method actors occurred on film. In *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style*, Steve Vineberg noted that Kazan, Strasberg, and other teachers produced actors "as comfortable in front of the camera as they were on stage" (99). More comfortable really, since actors could entirely shut out what they had been trained to believe was their major antagonist, the audience.

Since audiences could confer public acclaim as well as induce stage fright, a related external threat to acting was professional success. In his autobiography *A Dream of Passion*, Strasberg reproduced a drawing done by Boleslavsky at the Laboratory Theatre in the 1920s which represented an allegorical house through which Everyactor must journey to perfect his art (81). On top of the house, two chimneys labelled "praise" and "glory" belch smoke, signifying the mystification that public acclaim can cause when an actor is blinded by them. Despite his ambiguous behavior toward such stars as Brando and Monroe, Strasberg warned against success throughout his teaching career. "People at the top start to go; the most talented are the most vulnerable. When you become successful, at that moment, it dries up, deserts, becomes arid" (Hirsch 148). Here is the sunlight of success scorching vulnerable talent, as though burnt in an oven.

Strasberg also identified several external threats to his approach to teaching acting. Preeminent among them was what he termed the "British school." "The English style is outdated," Strasberg pontificated. "It is *acting*; it is not humanity or reality" (Hirsch 219). For him, English acting was external, cultivated, formal, and reserved—the antithesis of American authenticity, emotion, and energy. Writing his autobiography in the 1970s during the American theatre's excitement over the work of Grotowski, Strasberg saw his Method as beseiged and rushed to its defense. Grotowski's approach, like Meyerhold's and other "external" schools, "negates the presence of an emotional experience," wrote Strasberg, by emphasizing physical action as fundamental (184). Strasberg also found minor

enemies in former colleagues, like Sandford Meisner and Stella Adler, who had begun in what he considered the Stanislavski fold, but had wandered away from the container of the flock. Strasberg's seige mentality communicated itself to the actors. Jack Garfein noted "the 'inner circle' psychology" of Studio sessions, "the defensiveness, the sense that we were all initiates in a private club" (Hirsch 167). An acting culture based so fundamentally on containment entails such defensive-aggressive attitudes and behavior.

Clearly, the entailments of containment structured the major elements of The Method for Strasberg and his advocates. But did audiences also experience Method acting as somehow "contained?" When they watched Brando-Stanley shout "Stella," did these same entailments prompt them to think that the actor-character's body could no longer contain his emotions? To begin to answer this question requires that the Method's discourse about acting be placed in the context of post-war culture and society.

<div align="center">V</div>

Audiences experience acting theory indirectly. Brando played Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; he did not play a Method Actor. To locate Brando-Kowalski in a dramatic narrative is to acknowledge that the source-path-goal schema also played a significant role in shaping the audience's perception of Brando's signature moment, since this image schemata underlies all conventional narrative structure. While these two schemas may have shaped his "Stella!" for most of the audience, other image schematas no doubt came into play for spectators watching Brando-Stanley throughout the course of the drama, including "force" and "attraction." Clearly, a range of schematas, plus their attendant metaphors, would shape the audience's overall understanding of *Streetcar*. If many schemas are operative in a spectator's perception of a play, how many more must there be in a person's diverse experience of her or his culture! Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson assume that all of their primary schemas have given substantial shape to all of the world's cultures.[6]

In these circumstances, the best a critical historian can do is to determine, hermeneutically, which of the major schematas exerted a dominant influence in the culture of particular social groups and how these dominant schemas may have been aligned with others to create a nexus of behavior and belief that constituted the culture. Culture, in this rough definition of the term, would derive from different combinations of primary image schemata, along with their metaphorical extensions. Based in embodied knowledge, the discourse of a culture would have a concrete relationship to its kinesthetics. Lakoff and Johnson insist, morover, on linking a group's culture to the material conditions of its existence. Johnson

states that the human being "does not exist as an organism apart from its environment. . . . Our structured experience is an organism-environment interaction in which both poles are altered and transformed through an ongoing historical process" (207). While Lakoff and Johnson do not probe the historical nature of this "structured experience," their general approach is close to Fox-Genovese's method, an analysis of the interaction of historical agencies and structures.[7]

A complete analysis of The Method in the context of the dominant culture of Cold War America is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the image schema of containment operated near the center of that culture during the 1950s. Hence, The Method may be viewed as a kind of synecdoche of the culture of containment. The culture of more marginalized groups, however—including white workers, African-Americans, and homosexual groups—seems not to have given such prominence to the containment schema. Interestingly, the analytical figuration center-and-margin, an image schemata itself, follows rather easily from the use of image schematas to organize an understanding of historical cultures.

The popularity, even notariety, then, of The Method among the American "middle class" of the 1950s was probably no historical accident. Biographer of Strasberg Cindy Adams writes that "the Studio actor was the right person for the right time" (215). As critic Colette Brooks explains, in the 1950s

> the seeming ascendency of sincerity and instinct over training, together with the ensuing conflation of life and art, led to a comparatively new circumstance in American acting—the psychology (and personality) of the performer were conceived of as more compelling, on the whole, than the particular work he appeared in. (96)

Brooks' insight suggests that many Americans shared the assumption of Strasberg and his actors that "sincerity" and instinctual drives constituted an inner core, a true self both vulnerable and constricted in its containment.

The plays and films in which many Method actors appeared in the late 1940s and '50s confirmed the reality of the contained self for American theatregoers. Theodore Hoffman joked that "the fundamental fault of The Method is that it always seems to be producing the same play, a play about the tragically frustrated desires of well-intentioned, deeply feeling failures, of Strindberg's characters living a Chekhovian life amid Ibsen's social problems" (36). Though exaggerated, it's an apt caricature of the protagonists in *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Member of the Wedding*, and *Picnic*.

More Americans affirmed the authenticity of the contained self at the movie theatre. Critic Thomas Atkins writes:

> Method acting is the perfect style for the self-conscious and divided mood of the fifties. . . . Brando, Montgomery Clift, Julie Harris, Eli Wallach, Patricia Neal, Kim Hunter, Anthony Perkins, Rod Steiger and other Method performers are best in divided parts based on the unresolved tension between an outer social mask and an inner reality of frustration that usually has a sexual basis. (114)

Herbert Blau's vision of popular theatre in the 1950s, which encompassed film culture as well, is darker but no less relevant: "[It] was a carapace in which one secreted his fear and trembling, muffled his indignation, and relieved outrage by innocuous subjective ejaculations" (88). Significantly, these critics rely fundamentally on metaphors of containment ranging from the inner dynamics of sexual frustration to the outer protective armor of insects.

Container metaphors circulated in other arenas of social life during the 1950s. Theatre historian Steve Vineberg discusses the popularity of existentialism, psychiatry, and the sociology of "the teenage problem"—all movements that positioned an inner, genuine self against the world—as trends that paralleled and legitimized Method acting. Through intimidation, blacklisting, and outright force, McCarthyism in the early '50s strove to empty the container of America of all political undesirables, creating a culture of introspection and suspicion that pervaded governmental, educational, and entertainment institutions. White Americans moved to the suburbs in record numbers, seeing in their ranch houses a container for their new anxieties about conformity and sexual roles. And in foreign affairs, George F. Kennan enunciated a figuration that would guide U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War, the doctrine of containment.

All of this is not to say that audiences immediately thought of the threats of momism, conformity, and Communism when they watched Brando wail out his "Stella!" But they may have unknowingly categorized Brando's emotional explosion and the threatening flow of red ink into previously "free" areas of the global map as the same kinds of events, since Method acting and the policy of containment are linked through the body. The image schemata of containment together with several other dominant schemas and their extensions in metaphor seems to have bound these and other similitudes into a nexus of entailments that created a powerful centripetal force in American culture from the late 1940s into the 1960s. This social energy, on stage and off, may have channelled what Wilshire terms the "mimetic fusion" (16) of social interaction in a specific direction, a direction that probably induced many spectators to create and

maintain an historical "world" centered on containment. A thorough investigation might show that Brando's Misunderstood Male was right at home in the period that gave American culture bomb shelters and "closeted" homosexuals.[8]

Notes

1. In this regard, Frank Lentricchia, in the same volume of essays, remarks that new historicism is constituted by the "unlikely marriage of Marx and Foucault, with Foucault as dominant partner" (235).

2. To spotlight Brando as an exmplar of Strasberg's Method, as I do throughout this essay, is not without its ironies. Although Brando did study with Kazan and Lewis at the Studio, Stella Adler, one of Strasberg's major antagonists in the battles among former Group Theatre actors in the late 1940s and '50s, was Brando's primary mentor. On the other hand, all of the former Group actors shared a general orientation toward the teaching of acting, despite their disagreements. And in the minds of most Americans, Brando—especially Brando as Stanley Kowalski—came to personify "Method acting." My choice of Brando has more to do with his cultural persona than with his actual training.

3. Disdaining the lure of polyphony, Jean Alter asks semioticians "to find an organizing mechanism" among the various sign systems of the theatre that "makes sense of their totality" (93). His own solution is to elevate referentiality above performance; for Alter, audiences would have used the character of Kowalski to organize their understanding of Brando's virtuosity.

4. Connerton distinguishes between incorporating and inscribing activities, the latter defined as messages sent through the storing and retriving of information (eg., in a book). He wonders, however, if incorporation might underlie all forms of inscription: "It may be indeed that no type of inscription is at all conceivable without such an irreducible incorporating aspect" (76).

5. Similar experiments included those by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay designed to test the categories used by people in various cultures to identify colors. Regardless of their language group, all participants identified the same hue of a color as the best example of that color category, demonstrating that color categories within cultures are not uniform; some members of the color category "blue," for example, are understood to be better examples than others. In cross-cultural research on plant and animal naming, Berlin and his associates empirically established that people in all cultures use psychologically basic categories midway between more specific and more general categories of naming. When asked to identify a certain tree, for instance, an English language speaker would almost always call it an "oak" or a "maple," rather than a "sugar maple" or a "deciduous tree."

6. Although they have isolated what they believe to be the most pervasive image schemas in human experience, Lakoff and Johnson have not attempted to enumerate all of them. After noting twenty-seven schemas, Johnson admits that this is only a "partial list" (126).

7. This general approach accords with Louis Montrose's merging of neo-Marxism and new historicism, in which structuring and subjectivity are mutually constitutive processes. See Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*.

8. See David Sauran's book on "the politics of masculinity" during the 1950's.

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