

Can cognitive science resolve Diderot's paradox?

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Abstract. Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comdien*, (written in the 1770s but not published until 1830), established the theoretical framework for the discussion of emotion in acting. His counter-intuitive assertion was that the actor's skill consists not in experiencing the character's emotion but in imitating precisely its outward appearance. Modern actors are still preoccupied with this issue: communication of emotion is one of the actor's primary tasks but emotions are not normally subject to conscious control. At first sight, cognitive science is not the obvious place to look for greater insight into the nature of acted emotion. As Joseph LeDoux points out, for much of its history, cognitive science has ignored the study of emotion. However, in recent years the distinction between cognition and emotion, like so many other dualisms, has begun to collapse.

Robert Harnish's broad construal of cognitive science incorporates neuroscience and psychology and both fields have provided rich pickings for acting theorists and practitioners. Thodule Ribot provided Stanislavsky with the idea of action as the substrate for emotion as well as the notion of emotion memory. Antonio Damasio's work suggested an entirely new approach to emotion for director Katie Mitchell, while other researchers' insights with huge potential for theatre practice have yet to be exploited. For example, Paul Ekman lists nine causes of emotion, several of which are under conscious control and could therefore be used by actors. The experiments of Schachter and Singer and Stuart Valins investigate the links between emotional episodes, somatic feedback and cognition. Their conclusions provide the hint for a new acting strategy: general physical arousal could be used as the basis for a convincing portrayal of any emotion.

There are some thorny methodological and ethical issues entailed in emotion research. How can we reliably arouse emotion in the laboratory in order to study it? How can physiological response related to emotion be distinguished from the routine functioning of the autonomic nervous system? To what extent can we provoke an intense emotional response in a subject without abusing the individual? Because of these conundrums, researchers have frequently turned to experts trained in recalling, arousing and expressing emotions under artificial conditions, i.e. actors. But actors may be able to do considerably more for cognitive science than provide convenient experimental guinea pigs: they could suggest areas for future enquiry, as a number of actor trainers' discoveries anticipate the insights of philosophers interested in situated and enactive cognition.

This paper identifies some intriguing parallels between actor training and cognitive science, while raising a host of methodological and epistemological questions that both connect and divide the two areas. I suggest some specific ways that contemporary cognitive science can further inspire and inform acting theory and how artistic practice might be relevant to scientific research. Finally, I describe some unique experiments that draw on experimental psychology, contem-

porary actor training and state of the art technology, that are designed to illuminate some ancient theoretical questions and suggest new directions for both art and science.

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