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Crisis and Recovery: Theatre and Performance Before and After the Global Pandemic

Anthropo(S)cene: Post-Psychophysical Consideration of Michael Chekhov's Atmospheres and a Call for Sustainable Pedagogy

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Abstract

Disrupting human activity the world over, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted humanity's fundamental relationship with air. The atmospheric medium in which we are immersed sustains life and underpins sensation (Ingold 2015). Human embodiment takes place within, and is influenced by, a 'weather world' (Ingold in Cornford 2020: 153). As theatre-makers increasingly grapple with the existential threat of climate change and inquire into sustainable practices, their efforts may be undermined by the humanist frame of mainstream pedagogies. Psychophysical techniques informed by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body repaired the Cartesian divide by recognizing the indivisibility of an artist's 'bodymind' (Zarrilli 2020: 106; Zarrilli 2009: 4). Yet, these practices institutionalized a dichotomy between the human and non-human (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 12). Frank Camilleri (2019) has therefore called for the adoption of postphenomenological theory within actor training. This requires shifting from the anthropocentric consideration of an actor's 'bodymind' to the more embedded exploration of a 'bodyworld' (Camilleri 2020: 25-26). By building upon Cornford's (2020, 2021) research, I argue that Chekhov's atmospheric work represents a 'post-psychophysical' (Camilleri 2020: 27) approach to embodied technique. Applying this novel conception within my practice has allowed me to support actors in adopting a more ecocentric frame as they shape being-in-the-world through collaboration with the air. This paper weaves a necessary new thread into the growing tapestry of Chekhov-inspired research. It also prompts further consideration of the themes of ecology and sustainability within Chekhov's technique. If storytellers are to play a role in considering the climate crisis and perhaps inspire post-human understanding of our collective situation, a twenty-first century re-imagining of the pedagogies underpinning their practices is required.

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My life stretches across borders and cultures, which seems fitting in the context of this discussion.

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Presentation Landmarks

- 1- Story and the Climate Crisis / Les histoires et la crise climatique
- 2- Psychophysicality / La psychophysique
- 3- An intervention: Bodymind vs Bodyworld / Une intervention: l'esprit-corps contre le corps-mondial
- 4- Chekhov's Atmospheres / Les atmosphères de Chekhov
- 5- A New (Post-psychophysical) Story / Une nouvelle histoire (après-psychophysique)

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A Problem of Story

“Can we tell a new story about climate change?” (O’Brien et al. 2019: vi). This question opens the preface of *Our Entangled Future* (O’Brien et al. 2019), a collection of tales that seek to reimagine narratives in order to effect social change. The book’s editors posit that storytelling is the means through which the “root causes of climate change” (O’Brien et al. 2019: vii), how humanity conceives of itself and its interrelation with the world, can be addressed. Researchers Heidi Henderson and Christine Wamsler (2019) elsewhere make the allied statement that climate change is “essentially a problem of story” (Henderson and Wamsler 2019: 346). These and related claims acknowledge the fundamental role of narrative within human cognition and relationships (Henderson and Wamsler 2019: 347). Individual meaning-making takes place within a ‘superorganic’ cultural framework, which means that the very stories composing our shared web of understanding condition thought and behaviour (Bruner 2019). A growing body of research therefore points toward storytelling as a critical tool for shifting human climate-related activity (Henderson and Wamsler 2019: 346). In addition to the volume I first referenced, a growing number of artists across disciplines have answered the call to reimagine our collective future (Armistead 2021). Notable examples of theatrical interventions include: Chantal Bilodeau’s work as a playwright and Artistic Director of *The Arctic Cycle* and the National Arts Centre of Canada’s two-year *Climate Change Cycle*, co-curated by Bilodeau and Sarah Garton Stanley. Despite the promise of such creative activity, the question I first shared casts a shadow over the efforts of theatre artists: “*Can* we tell a new story about climate change?” (O’Brien et al. 2019: vi, my italics). Are the assumptions underpinning dominant theatre training methodologies poisoning the ability of theatre makers to tell a necessary new story? First, I will detail the development of psychophysical practices’ problematic culture.

Then, I will point toward a suitable theoretical intervention. Finally, I will apply this new framework to argue for a radical reconsideration of Michael Chekhov's work in the 21st Century.

Looking Upstream of Practice

The organized training of theatre artists pursued in most studios, conservatoires, and higher education institutions is “essentially a twentieth century phenomenon” (Evans 2019: 4). However, the practices involved and the cultural web underpinning them began their developments earlier. For centuries, Western training approaches generally focused on a dichotomously divided mind or body (Zarrilli 2002[1995]). These techniques were influenced by a Cartesian dualism whose roots stretch back to Plato (Zarrilli 2002[1995]: 11-12). Just over a century ago, these practices were notably reframed. Russian director Constantin Stanislavski is widely credited as the first to introduce the term ‘psychophysical’ within theatre to describe the inseparability of mind and body (Morris 2013: 18; Whyman 2016: 157). Stanislavski was inspired by the writings of those exploring psychophysicality within science (Morris 2013: 18), studies of Eastern philosophy and yogic practice (Whyman 2016: 164), and the earlier work around psychophysical training of American Delsartean Genevieve Stebbins (Whyman 2016: 157-158). Stanislavski's post-Cartesian paradigm shift sparked decades of practical inquiries into the storyteller's unified nature around the world. Psychophysicality is now a core concept within theatre practice (Whyman 2016: 157) and related approaches dominate the training landscape. This ‘tangled taxonomy’ of practices is delineated in different ways depending on cultural values (Fleming 2013). One might include practices related to: Stanislavski, Chekhov, Lecoq, Bing, Copeau, Laban, Feldenkrais, Alexander, Viewpoints, Delsarte, Suzuki, Barba, Duncan, Grotowski, Meyerhold, Pisk, Linklater, Barker, Cohen and Body-Mind Centering®, Zarrilli, and others. These unique bodies of practice lie downstream of a key source: phenomenological theory.

In the words of scholar and educator Mark Evans (2019), “[t]alking about the body necessitates talking about ourselves as embodied subjects” (Evans 2019: 1). Practitioners draw upon the field of

phenomenology in order to do so (Ravid 2014: 9; Spatz 2015: 11-12). Edmund Husserl's foundational inquiries into the nature of 'being-in-the-world' were subsequently developed by others, including French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968). Merleau-Ponty's (1962) more ecocentric inquiries into the nature of embodied consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 88; Steeves 2000) have largely become the spine of psychophysical discourse and practice (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 1). However, these practices retained competing attributes acquired during their development within specific cultural and political contexts (Evans 2009). This tension has led practitioners to ignore the essentially ecological nature of Merleau-Ponty's work.

Frank Camilleri (2019) has criticized the anthropocentric focus of psychophysical practices. He identifies two sources of persistent humanism: applications of classical, or Husserl's, phenomenology and the concept of the 'romanticized natural' body within many practices (Murray and Keefe in Camilleri 2019: Introduction, Para. 51-5; Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 7). Conceptions of the 'natural' body were fundamental to European movement training in the 19th and early 20th Centuries (Evans 2009: 127). Anti-industrialist sentiment motivated these "holistic and humanist approach[es] to the training of the body" (Evans 2009: 131). In my 2020 thesis, I explored how the 'natural' and later 'neutral' body are each "a particularly European fiction moulded by classicism, colonialism, and racism" (Douglas 2020: 11). The cultural scaffolding attached to Western training approaches centers whiteness and an anthropocentric attitude toward embodiment (Douglas 2020). Modern psychophysical practitioners have generally maintained this problematic inheritance (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para 7). An anti-technological stance motivates many present-day practitioners to ignore a process' material context to exclusively focus on techniques of human embodiment (Spatz 2015: 13). Camilleri (2019) states such practices position the body as a "free-standing entity, a more-or-less autonomous agent who does what [they want]" (Camilleri 2019: Introduction, Para. 10). Therefore, the conventional psychophysical position: misunderstands the contextual nature of perception described by Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 96, 116), refuses his ecocentric frame (Steeves 2000: 187-188), ignores that human embodiment has been shaped by technology for millennia (Camilleri 2019: Introduction, Para. 70), and imagines that

human processes exist independently of the world (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 7). The frame of psychophysical practices hoping to unify the ‘bodymind’ reinforce another imaginary divide between the human and non-human (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 12).

As an educator and artist, I have been observing how cultural frameworks condition human thought and action for years. If the arguments that opened this paper are to be considered, then it follows that the anthropocentric meme carried by psychophysical practice is shaping the worldview and actions of theatrical storytellers who encounter these methodologies. How has this delineated our collective imagination? How does it distort our embodied relationships with the world? “Can we tell a new story about climate change?” (O’Brien et al. 2019: vi). In order for practitioners to assume their role as consciousness-shifting changemakers, we ourselves require an intervention.

Fortunately, Camilleri (2020) proposes a means to update the “core concept that has been conditioning various training processes that emerged in the past century” in order to “reflect more accurately the human involvement with the non-human, whether the latter marks the natural world, other species, objects, or technology” (Camilleri 2020: 26). He achieves this by leveraging the postphenomenology of American professor Don Ihde (2016). The resulting ‘post-psychophysical’ framework researches an embedded embodiment (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 1, Para. 4). Camilleri (2019) coined the term ‘bodyworld’ to describe the resulting “assemblage of human and non-human elements bound in relations of exteriority” (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 2, Para. 13). The post-psychophysicality of Camilleri (2019, 2020) realizes the ecological promise of Merleau-Ponty’s (1964) earlier work while establishing a theoretical frame capable of grappling with humanity’s role in the drama of the Anthropocene (Douglas 2020).

Camilleri (2020) has applied the post-psychophysical lens to re-evaluate technologies utilized within Jacques Lecoq’s pedagogy. His research begins a necessary process of recontextualization for theatre educators and practitioners. For the past two years, I have been engaged in a related research praxis. My development of Michael Chekhov’s work has been catalyzed by a post-psychophysical

framework (Douglas 2020). Informed by my research and teaching, I propose that Chekhov's creative technique be considered fundamentally post-psycho-physical.

Chekhov's Post-Psycho-physical Technique

Michael Chekhov was a Russian-born actor, director, teacher, and early devising innovator. He trained and worked with Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov was acclaimed for his artistry, becoming director of the MAT's experimental studio in 1922 (Fleming 2020a: 18-19). The radical approach to acting and creativity that he developed was a rebellion against key principles espoused by Stanislavski (Cornford 2021: 132). Chekhov's technique structures playful and transformative collaborations between the embodied imagination and images (Daboo 2007: 264; Zinder 2009). This work drew inspiration from many sources, including the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (Cornford 2021: 162). Communist dissatisfaction with Chekhov's beliefs forced this artist to flee Russia (Fleming 2020a: 18). His technique would continue to be developed through practical research across cultures and continents. A significant portion of this work took place at Dartington Hall, in the south west of England.

Purchased by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst in 1925 (Dartington Trust, N.d.), Dartington Hall was intended to be a model "democratically-run community that incorporated art, education and spirituality as well as industry and agriculture" (Neima 2019: 111). The Elmhirsts' vision was inspired by the purposeful and embodied education offered in two Indian schools established by Rabindranath Tagore, one of whose founding Leonard had supported (Neima 2019: 112-113; Cornford 2013: 193). It must be acknowledged that the Elmhirst's inherited wealth, which financed this project, had been acquired through unsustainable industrial processes and immoral business approaches (Brown 2017: Para 1; Cornford 2013: 191). Despite ethical tensions and a tumultuous evolution over time (Neima 2017: 117), Dartington's core curiosity has remained constant for nearly a century.

Dorothy Elmhirst herself described the aim of Dartington Hall as seeking "a balance between all the practical things that were done on the land and the activities of the mind and spirit" (Dartington Trust

2020[1967]: 6:50). This statement is clearly inflected by Elmhirst's guiding desire that "human values should be respected above all other values" (Dartington Trust 2020[1967]: 8:15). However, it captures the seed of what would become Dartington's central inquiry: the research of embodiment within its context through artistic and other means. Indeed, a "deep engagement with context" would eventually become the "very core and spine" of every subject taught at Dartington's College of Arts (Myers 2018: 317). Whether pursued in studios, woodlands, or by the river, artistic engagement with place permeated this institution's spiralling curriculum (Myers 2018: 317). Dartington is now recognized as an international leader in sustainable education and will soon launch a postgraduate course in Arts and Ecology. This institution's spine of sustainability was perhaps developed through the activities of the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington from 1936-1938.

These years were a time of radical growth for Chekhov's theatre making processes, especially his work with atmospheres (Cornford 2021: 167). Chekhov (2002[1953]) states atmospheres are "to be found everywhere" (Chekhov 2002[1953]: 48) and that they are "the lifeblood of every performance" (Chekhov in Cornford 2021: 175). While his latter description evokes bodily physiology, Chekhov was clear that the atmosphere "is a feeling which is independent of anyone – the feeling which lives in the space in the room and belongs to no-one; this is atmosphere" (Chekhov in Cornford 2021: 175). Tom Cornford (2020) demystifies Chekhov's descriptions by noting "the simple fact that all living things require a medium – air or water – within which to exist" (Cornford 2020: 153). Cornford (2020) then draws on Ingold (2015) to explain that "if the medium is a condition of interaction, then it follows that the quality of that interaction will be tempered by what is going on in that medium, that is, by the weather" (Ingold in Cornford 2020: 153). Humans therefore live in a "weather world" (Ingold in Cornford 2020: 153) which Chekhov's students learned to navigate and organize into compositional scores (Cornford 2020: 154). By "penetrat[ing] into the atmosphere with our hands, legs, bodies, voices, etc." (Chekhov in Cornford 2021: 177), these actors established reciprocal contact with the material world or 'setting' of their performance (Cornford 2021: 149, 177). Chekhov's pedagogical goal can be described as embedded embodiment.

Chekhov (2002[1953]) categorized his own work as psychophysical (Chekhov 2002[1953]: 1-4). Yet, Cass Fleming (2013) argues that Chekhov's work is radically different enough from Stanislavski's that it might be classified outside of this lineage (Fleming 2013: 56). Fleming (2013) prefers the use of McDermott's flexible category of 'Embodied Theatre' (Fleming 2013: 58). While use of that term is largely compatible with my argument, I believe Chekhov's atmospheric work is best described as 'post-psychophysical'.

The paradigm of atmospheric involvement within Chekhov's technique perfectly matches the 'inner/outer/context' model of post-psychophysicality described by Camilleri (Camilleri 2019: Chapter 1, para. 4). Graham Dixon, a renowned teacher of Chekhov's work, uses the numbers 1, 2, and 3 to refer to these very sites of engagement. In addition, the ubiquity of atmosphere within Chekhov's approach means all composition is necessarily the pursuit of a 'bodyworld' (Camilleri 2020: 26). It is for this reason that images regularly blur boundaries between body and world in Chekhovian exercises, including the Imaginary Centre and Psychological Gesture (Douglas 2020). Chekhov's movement qualities, which are closely related to atmospheres, also reveal the post-psychophysicality of his technique. These exercises invite actors to move in collaboration with the air, instead of promoting the dichotomous and anthropocentric processes typical of Lecoq-derived psychophysical practices (Douglas 2020). Roanna Mitchell (2020) has also noted this difference, acknowledging some Chekhov-inspired practitioners modify his paradigm by grafting on elements of exercises from other practices (Mitchell 2020: 210-211).

Despite Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964) work and the language of post-psychophysicality being unavailable to Chekhov, he clearly researched an embedded embodiment in the late 1930s. In fact, the invitation he made to later practitioners to update his technique appears to signal openness to such developments. Chekhov encouraged others to seek "objective principles and laws for furthering our professional technique" (Chekhov 2002[1952]). These words echo Don Ihde's (2016) criticisms of early phenomenology's imbalanced subjectivism (Ihde 2016: Chapter 2, Para. 26). Perhaps Chekhov recognized the need for a postphenomenological turn that could realize the post-psychophysical spine of his technique.

Dreaming the Anthro(S)cene

Embracing a postphenomenological lens within my developing ‘neo-Chekhovian’ (Cornford 2020: 129) practice has led me to consider atmospheres as the ever-present ‘gameboard’ of the embodied play I facilitate (Douglas 2020). Students of mine have, in turn, embraced an ecocentric frame in reflections and creations. Chekhov’s work at Dartington produced similar results. The son of Dorothy Elmhirst recalled that his mother felt “Chekhov had led her ‘into a deeper awareness of nature’” (Rushe 2019: 28). This is the first paper to explore the post-psychophysicality of Chekhov’s technique and to link his work to conversations about sustainability. These areas deserve further cultivation, especially: the principle of contact with the ‘whole’ in Chekhov’s work, his teaching on the land (Rushe 2019: 28), and Chekhov’s exercises investigating the gestures of fauna (Cornford 2012: 58). Those areas where Chekhov’s cultural frame or technique are anthropocentric also require deeper consideration (Cornford 2020: 135). Finally, to what degree Chekhov’s contributions shaped Dartington’s renowned legacy and sustainable approach to pedagogy has yet to be established.

If theatre makers are to tell a new story and assume their pivotal role in combatting the climate crisis, the anthropocentrism woven into their framework of understanding must be addressed. Just as Cornford (2021) advocates for an atmospheric analysis of capitalism’s effects on communal settings, I urge practitioners to re-compose the cultural atmosphere of psychophysicality pervading theatrical institutions. The urgency of our situation demands that only sustainable pedagogies recognizing the interrelation between the environment and humans are shared. This will offer storytellers the best chance of rewriting the drama of the Anthro(S)cene.

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