

States of Consciousness: Performing Sensory Perceptions

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Abstract

This proposed discussion topic draws on our emerging scientific understanding of the breadth of human (and non-human) sensory perceptions to question what the future of theatrical performance may be, and importantly, how an expanded sensory perspective may be taught and learned by performers and audiences.

Recent work, such as the AHRC's Science in Culture Project "Rethinking the Senses" questions how people combine external information with perceptions of their bodily states, culminating in cross-modal and multisensory perspectives ("*I see and feel a mug, know its weight, whether it is hot or cold, know its colour in a variety of luminance conditions*", www.thesenses.ac.uk). Authors, such as Draper (2005), have highlighted there may be between 21 and 33 senses, including the sense of movement (kinaesthesia), sense of balance (equilibrioception), sense of agency over our limbs (proprioception), sense of time (chronoception), sense of space, sense of pain (nociception), sense of heat and cold (thermoception). Other senses, for example, electroreception (sense of electrical fields), magnetoreception (sense of magnetic fields), polarized light spectrum (sense of light) are thought to be senses humans do not currently perceive. Ultimately, however, it is a combination of senses that enable us to perceive a multidimensional world.

Following Aristotle, it has long-been the case within theatre arts that five core senses are a performative focus of practice (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). For example, the Stanislavski method (see Benedetti, 1982; Sawoski UN) is a minimalist approach to theatrical performance that uses a combination of physical gesture and vocal skill in relation to proximity, environment and audience. Others, such as McBurney, use concepts of tension (catatonic, relaxed/Californian, neural/economic, alert, suspense, passionate, tragic) that embody a range of human states related to physical and emotional experiences. These approaches aim to 'make the invisible visible' which become increasingly possible with the development of technologies that map, measure, learn, respond and communicate our human emotions, affective states and moods. Currently, however, there is a gap in our conceptual understanding and performance practice in how we might map, express and perceive the expanded range of emotions, such as the 33 highlighted by Draper. Reflecting on this apparent gap, we posit that it is important to consider how the expanded range of senses are learned and performed. It is also relevant to examine the possible implications for audience engagement that enhanced understanding of the senses, and indeed, an increased awareness of a greater range of senses, may bring.

We seek to stimulate a discussion among colleagues to develop an understanding of the possible gaps and tensions in practices related to sensory perception and

performance, and consider how they might be explored and examined through future creative practice.

References

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