ATTENTION, ABSORPTION AND HABIT: THE STANISLAVSKI SYSTEM
REEXAMINED AS A COGNITIVE PROCESS USING THE “THEATRE OF
CONSCIOUSNESS” MODEL OF BERNARD BAARS

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Konstantin Stanislavski stated that “Art should be on good terms with science.”\(^1\) This was far from an unqualified statement, as he stridently resisted the “scientific sophistries” that some actors used to replace true creative art. He recognized right away that art must make use of science in order to find nature, but that art was ultimately intuitive and outside the realm of science. He recognized, however, that science, particularly psychology, had an aim similar to his own – the exploration and explanation of the business of being human. We know for certain that Stanislavski was intensely preoccupied with psychologists. He went so far as to directly cite one in particular – Theodule Ribot – as a direct source for some of his work.

Many of the psychological foundations on which he built are no longer tenable. Any work such as his, that is steeped in the time of Freud, Ribot, and William James, is in danger of obsolescence, as those theorists have been modified, built upon, and even discarded. One might expect that Stanislavski should likewise be considered obsolete; a mere curiosity of a time long past. Close and thoughtful study can, however, reveal that the exact opposite is true. Many things we have learned about the human mind and its connection to the body in the decades since Stanislavski’s death can serve to reinforce his work, as well as provide an exciting way forward for actors and acting teachers.

This study uses a study from one such contemporary theorist to do exactly that. Psychology as James and Freud saw it still thrives today, but it has added to itself the newer field of Cognitive Science. This field’s major occupation is the study of cognition – the process of thought – and its function in the human mind. I use the 1997 work In the Theater of Consciousness by neurobiologist Bernard Baars to reorganize the Stanislavski System in more

\(^1\) Stanislavski and Benedetti xxiv
empirical and Cognitive terms. Demonstrating a kinship between these two seemingly disparate thinkers makes the case that Konstantin Stanislavski, while developing his System over some three decades, did more than just revolutionize acting in the West. We find that, as Rhonda Blair argues, he intuited “something fundamental about how we, as human beings and as actors, work.”

Demonstration of this immutable connection between the System and workings of the human mind allows us to understand the System itself in more empirical terms. It also reinvigorates the possibility of continuing Stanislavski’s process of exploration just as he might have. Had Stanislavski lived to see the staggering advances in both theoretical psychology and neuroscience, he would almost certainly have continued developing and refining his own work. This study serves as a reminder that the truest way to practice the Stanislavski System is to constantly reexamine and refine how we understand ourselves as actors and thinking beings.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER 1: BACKSTAGE: FORCES THAT DEFINE CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE........10

CHAPTER 2: THE STAGE: CONSCIOUSNESS AND ATTENTION IN THE ACTOR........31

CHAPTER 3: THE AUDIENCE: THE VAST CONTENTS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS........53

CONCLUSION....................................................................................................................70

BIBLIOGRAPHY...............................................................................................................76
For my mother, who has stood by me throughout this journey, and
for my father, who only got to see the beginning.
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Finally, I must thank my family, for teaching me from birth to ask questions about the world, and that education is never a waste. I hope to make you all as proud as you make me.
Introduction

“Isn’t that what it is to live and be an actor? Isn’t that inspiration?”

“I don’t know. Ask the psychologists.”

-Konstantin Stanislavski

Statement of the Problem

In his original draft preface to his first Russian book, *An Actor’s Work on Himself*, Konstantin Stanislavski stated that he believed “Art should be on good terms with science.”

This was far from an unqualified statement, as he stridently resisted the “scientific sophistries” that some actors used to replace true creative art. He recognized right away that art must make use of science in order to find nature, but that art was ultimately intuitive and outside the realm of science. He recognized, however, that science, particularly psychology, had an aim similar to his own – the exploration and explanation of the business of being human. We know for certain that Stanislavski was intensely preoccupied with psychologists. He went so far as to directly cite one in particular – Theodule Ribot – as a direct source for some of his work.

Many of the psychological foundations on which he built are no longer tenable. Any work such as his, that is steeped in the time of Freud, Ribot, and William James, is in danger of obsolescence, as those theorists have been modified, built upon, and even discarded. One might expect that Stanislavski should likewise be considered obsolete; a mere curiosity of a time long past. Close and thoughtful study can, however, reveal that the exact opposite is true. Many things we have learned about the human mind and its connection to the body in the decades since

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3 Stanislavski and Benedetti xxiv
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5 Stanislavski and Benedetti 198
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**Justification and Significance**

In 1934, when Stella Adler returned to the Group Theater after studying with Stanislavski, she reported to Lee Strasberg that they Group had misunderstood much of the

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System. Theatrical lore has it that Strasberg rejected this clarification, insisting, “Stanislavski doesn’t know; I KNOW.” Strasberg claimed to know Stanislavski’s work better than its inventor.

This anecdote, whether apocryphal or not, is illustrative. Of first note is the fact that, by 1934, Stanislavski’s work had progressed far past what would have been available to Strasberg in *An Actor Prepares*, the single volume of Stanislavski that was available in the United States at the time. It was, as Benedetti writes in *An Actor’s Work*, “a cut version of half a book.” Adler was exposed to a much fuller conception of the System as it would be enumerated in all three of the books that would be translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (*An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character* and *Creating A Role*), as well as the Method of Physical Action, which Stanislavski was developing at the time. This disagreement over technique, which eventually helped destroy the Group Theater itself, came about due to two main points. First, they both saw Stanislavski’s work as a completed whole rather than an ongoing process of experimentation and development. This first misunderstanding made possible a second, more insidious contention; that there was only one way to “correctly” interpret the System, and that only one who did so could be Stanislavski’s legitimate heir.

The dispute between Strasberg and Adler caused the Group Theater to split virtually in half, with members choosing between the two teachers. The split between these two would continue to magnify, as fellow Group members Sanford Meisner and Robert Lewis developed their own ideas based on the System. Over time, a new generation of American teachers followed the Group masters; each adding to or rejecting the work of those who came before. As

8 Stanislavski and Benedetti xxi
ideas have evolved over time, they have never quite healed the rift that began with a single angry conversation between Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. Debates between acting teachers can still tend toward the sectarian, and even newer techniques that claim to be “anti-Stanislavski” often continue this insistence on an ultimate “right” or “wrong” in actor training.⁹

To move this debate productively forward, I propose that we first move backward. By examining Stanislavski’s process of development and its sources I demonstrate that his basis was not just the reproduction of factual reality, as is so often thought. It is also not intended to focus an actor in on himself, as many detractors accuse. From the beginning, Stanislavski sought only to identify and access the tools that nature presents an actor in order to produce work of genius. These tools come from an actor’s personal makeup – his inseparable mind and body – and it was only by understanding the use of those tools in life that he could understand their use onstage.

By demonstrating the System’s kinship with Cognitive Science, this study offers a new nomenclature to discuss and debate the job of the actor irrespective of a specific teacher’s training methods. One teacher might be said to be more effective at training one part of an actor’s mind or body, and another might have an equal effectiveness in a different area. Some teachers might disagree at a more basic level about the use of attention and consciousness onstage. Thus the many teachers of today, both within and without the Stanislavski “tradition,” can be examined as different points of view on the same material. Such a discussion could empower a student actor to find the appropriate teacher for her own particular mind and body without resorting to the “one size fits all” mindset that the search for Stanislavski’s “heir” would suggest.

⁹ Close examination of many of these “anti-Stanislavski” techniques often reveals far more apposition than opposition.
Review of the Literature

This study owes considerable debt to two writers in particular. The first, William Archer, wrote his *Masks or Faces?: A Study in the Psychology of Acting* a decade and a half before Stanislavski began his earliest work on the System. Archer meant primarily to oppose Denis Diderot and others that demanded an actor not feel emotion while performing. By directly questioning as many actors as he could about their actual methods, he elucidated the idea of a split consciousness that was capable both of feeling and not-feeling simultaneously. He thoughtfully explored many of the other components of an actor’s profession, and did so in an eminently readable and entertaining way. The thought processes and interrogative mindset of *Masks or Faces* made this study possible.

It would be disingenuous, if not dishonest, to not likewise acknowledge the debt this study owes to the work of teacher, director, and theorist Rhonda Blair. Blair has become perhaps the most authoritative voice in the field today on the confluence between acting theory and cognitive science. Her 2008 book *The Actor, Image and Action* was an indispensable guide for this study. It was through her work that I found Bernard Baars’s work, and her ongoing experimentation made the utility of this study clear. I explore some of her work more explicitly in Chapters Two and Three, but this study can nearly be said to simply build off of a connection between two of the sources of her expansive and exciting work.

Sharon Carnicke’s 1998 work *Stanislavsky in Focus* contains an important analysis of the System’s evolution, influences and interpretation. Her study is not explicitly cognitive in nature, and is therefore not heavily cited here. Her holistic view of the System as an ever-evolving process of experimentation and discovery has heavily influenced the foundational assumptions of this study, however.
A few other writers are exploring the intersection of theater and Cognitive Science. F. Elizabeth Hart and Bruce McConachie’s 2009 compilation *Performance and Cognition* brings together a number of these scholars. In addition to McConachie and Hart, scholars such as Neal Swettenham, Howard Mancing, Tobin Nellhaus, Lisa Zunshine, and Naomi Rokotnitz work to develop Cognitive Science as a new critical voice for the fields of Theater and Performance Studies. The contents of this volume exemplify the breadth of this field, however; Hart and McConachie are occupied with the basic foundational task of demonstrating Cognitive Science’s place among other critical voices such as psychoanalysis and phenomenology, and therefore do not directly address questions of mimetic acting in any depth. Of the two essays that do directly address acting, one is by Rhonda Blair, and covers material more fully covered in *The Actor, Image, and Action*. The other, “Neuroscience and Creativity in the Rehearsal Process,” by John Lutterbie, conducts a fascinating exploration into concepts of self as they are constructed and deconstructed in rehearsal. Lutterbie’s work is certainly noteworthy, but ultimately falls outside of the strict limitations of this study.

**Methodology and Remaining Chapters**

As the primary goal of this study is to demonstrate kinship between Bernard Baars and Konstantin Stanislavski, my primary methodology is to demonstrate how concepts from one resonate with the other. At times, this is easily accomplished with a simple side-by-side comparison. At other times, I use sources in common to both to demonstrate how the two arrive at similar terminology from nearly identical sources. I also use the work of a contemporary theorist and teacher, Rhonda Blair, to offer a glimpse into how one might synthesize an understanding of cognition and acting in the rehearsal process of today.
My organizational methodology is almost exclusively from Bernard Baars. Baars primarily splits his theater model into two areas – the Conscious “Stage” and the Unconscious “Audience.” He makes mention of Context Operators as part of a “Backstage,” but does not give that backstage a central place within In the Theater of Consciousness. I take advantage of this mention to create my own preparatory space, and therefore dedicate my first chapter to these “Backstage” concepts, as well as the foundational Stanislavskian concept of the Creative State.

My second chapter is on Baars’s most central occupation – Consciousness. After a brief overview of Consciousness as Baars understands it, I demonstrate several concepts from Stanislavski that would, according to the Russian master’s own description, likely fit onto the Baarsian “Stage.”

My third chapter, on the cognitive Unconscious, requires a bridge from Consciousness. As Baars indicates, the operations of the Unconscious are largely “opaque.” I therefore use a bridging concept from Baars, Volition, to discuss how Conscious effort unlocks Unconscious processes. I demonstrate that Stanislavski quite probably meant for many elements of the System to be performed unconsciously, and, with evidence from Rose Whyman’s “The Actor’s Second Nature: Stanislavski and William James,” I offer up ways in which Stanislavski meant to explicitly train an actor’s cognitive unconscious for use in performance.

Limitations

Cognitive Psychology, like acting theory, is a complex and ever-changing field. It would likely be possible to find a psychological backing for any number of ideas. To combat this, I limit the psychological scope of this study as much as possible to Bernard Baars’s In the Theater of Consciousness and the sources he directly attributes. The choice of this particular book

betrays another limitation. In the Theater of Consciousness is a book written less for 
neuroscientists and more for lay scholars and thinkers. This is important to note, because this 
study seeks to identify the ramifications of Baarsian metaphor as they apply to Stanislavski. This 
thesis proclaims no special knowledge that would advance the field of neuroscience. At its heart, 
In the Theater of Consciousness functions as a metaphor, not a prescription, and it is in that spirit 
that I use it in this study.

While this thesis maintains that the work of Stanislavski cannot be taken as a singular 
snapshot, it does become necessary to define the scope of Stanislavski’s work as it pertains to 
this study. His work has been transmitted with qualitative differences by many agents: himself, 
his translators, his students, their students, and so on. Another, more exhaustive analysis of 
Stanislavskian ideas may be possible, but this thesis takes Jean Benedetti’s recent translation, 
The Actor’s Work, as the primary authority. This limitation has some serious ramifications, as 
differences in translation between Benedetti’s edition and the original English translations by 
Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood could cause significant changes to this study, as could deep 
examination of Stanislavski’s own Russian editions. Using An Actor’s Work also necessitates a 
neglect of Stanislavski’s final work on the Method of Physical Action and Active Analysis – 
both of which are worthy of additional study.

An easy argument can be made that the job of the actor includes far more elements, 
cognitive and otherwise, than are dealt with in Stanislavski. Some obvious elements external to 
Stanislavski will be addressed where appropriate, but primary consideration of these is left to 
future researchers. Likewise, this study tends toward American schools of mimetic acting. 
Further study along these lines could certainly be done for Eurasian successors of Stanislavski as
well as acting (and other performance) traditions that have never directly contended with the System.

**A Note on Terms and Usage**

Terminology presents a fundamental problem to this study, as it demonstrates kinship between two fields, cognitive science and mimetic acting, that seem, on the surface, quite disparate. That problem is further complicated with the comparison of a scientific source that uses theatrical terminology (as Baars’s theater model does) alongside a system for performance (Stanislavki’s) that shares some terminology with the *fin de siècle* psychology that undergirds it. To that end, I attempt to explain new terms as they are introduced, and to adopt a particular convention of editing that will hopefully serve to clarify these problems for the reader. Terms that are exclusive to the Stanislavski System I render in italics, and theatrical terms directly from Baars’s model are always capitalized. I attempt to make these antecedents explicit when necessary as well as adopting these conventions.
Chapter 1

Backstage: Forces that Define Conscious Experience

Creative State, Absorbed State

An actor performing is a human in conflict. She is subject to the simultaneous demands of the text, fellow artists and the audience. She must also satisfy her own needs for personal expression, professional comportment, and continued employment. Actors have risen to this daunting challenge for thousands of years. Konstantin Stanislavski wished to identify how actors confronted these demands to produce the best possible result. His conclusion was that actors of genius did not create because of these competing demands, but because they could divest themselves of them, and live naturally through the fictional circumstances created onstage by the actors and text. This ability, this openness to fictional or mimetic experience, was central to his work. He called this state of openness the Creative State. It had both inner and outer elements, but culminated in a unified state of physical and psychological openness.

The sheer number of concepts introduced by the Stanislavski System might appear to contradict this desire. To add each of these concerns to an actor’s consciousness while maintaining a sense of openness and spontaneity would certainly be a daunting proposition should we accept it.\(^{11}\) It is not, however, what Stanislavski intended. He explicitly wrote, “Work on the ‘system’ at home. Onstage put it to one side…You cannot act the ‘system.’”\(^{12}\) His work was intended to get an actor as close as possible to nature while performing the apparently unnatural act of living within a fiction on public display.

\(^{12}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 612
This distinction between training, rehearsal, and performance is key to understanding his process. Each element Stanislavski introduces is often not an addition. Many are, in their own ways, subtractions. Stanislavski identifies specific sites of possible failure that must be removed from the actor’s consciousness. The chapters of An Actor’s Work are a way of training actors to reach the Creative State in performance, and to empty themselves of all else. An exercise meant to develop a particular skill is generally not meant to occupy an actor’s consciousness during performance – particularly not at the expense of the Creative State.

This Creative State is, for Stanislavski, prerequisite for actors to produce “the art of experiencing.” It is in this state that true acting is possible, and when excessive reliance on technique or clichés of business becomes unnecessary. This Creative State exists when actors believe in the world of the play, and truly act as the author’s character within themselves. In his first chapter on the “Actor’s Creative State,” he gives us this (fictionalized and idealized) account of an actor’s first experience of it: “At that moment my head started to spin. I lost myself in the role, and didn’t know what was me and what was the character.” Put this way, the Creative State reads like a kind of trance, or possession. Kostya, Stanislavski’s invented (and eponymous) student goes so far as to think it a “magical transformation.”

This equation of the Creative State and a trance or possession is both strengthened and clarified by Stanislavski’s own sources. His lifelong search for a reliable path to genius began not just in his art, but within the realm of fin de siècle psychology. Stanislavski is known to have studied (and cited) Theodule Ribot, whose “Essai sur le Passions” (Essay on the Creative Imagination) was published in 1906, the same year Stanislavski (who was fluent in French)

\[13\] Stanislavski and Benedetti 16.
\[14\] Stanislavski and Benedetti 325
began his search for a “grammar” of acting. In one section of the *Essai*, Ribot briefly traces the history of “inspiration” from the Greeks to his present day. The Greeks believed that the sheer scope of creativity and creative thought were beyond the capability of mere humans. In order to explain its existence, creative thought was ascribed to an external influence – the gods. This inspiration was thought not just to induce ideas, but to produce a sort of possession. This assumption has long been true of performers. In Plato’s dialogue *Ion*, he discerns that, in order for a rhapsodist to perform as he does, he must either be a liar, or he must be “divinely inspired,” and “carried out of [him]self” in an “ecstasy.”

Ribot points out that our conception of creativity as inspiration or possession has persisted long after the gods who were first its source have been exiled from our imaginations. We translate the experience of inspiration with metaphors such as “enthusiasm,” “poetic frenzy,” “possession by a spirit,” “being overcome,” and a host of others. Ribot relocates the source of this inspiration to something internal and natural, rather than the external and supernatural assumptions of divine possession. He renames it “The Unconscious Factor.” As evidence, he cites examples of highly creative individuals who believe their most creative times to be ones in which part of their consciousnesses are outright suppressed, such as somnambulance and intoxication. These states are partial and illusory, however, and it is here that Ribot finds a certain amount of limitation in his explanation. He sees inspiration arising in part from an interaction between the unconscious and the conscious, but stops short of a direct

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15 Stanislavski and Benedetti 198. Attributed to Theodule Ribot.
18 Ribot 50.
way to induce that interaction. He prefers instead “mediating” concepts, where a person selects something he can consciously attend to that is known to excite subconscious results.  

This was an overriding demand of Stanislavski’s process and investigation - to access “the subconscious through the conscious.” For a long period he openly adapted concepts from Ribot. Indeed, the entire System could be seen as a Ribotian mediation, an extended metaphor that can be attended to in order to access that which cannot. There is, however, another likely psychological antecedent to Stanislavski that may provide a greater perspective. Rose Whyman contends that Stanislavski’s work is also heavily influenced by the psychology of William James. Whyman makes a clear circumstantial case that Stanislavski was familiar with James, whose Principles of Psychology had been translated into Russian by 1896, and who was cited in books on psychology that we know were in Stanislavski’s personal library. Whyman makes a convincing case that the role of habit in “the actor’s toilette” that Stanislavski proposes is borrowed almost verbatim from James. James was a towering figure in the understanding of mind and brain at the close of the nineteenth century, and his expansive reasoning provides another clear example for our understanding of Stanislavski.

In Principles of Psychology, the closest analog to inspiration and the Creative State (where conscious and unconscious interact) is the state of hypnosis. It had been known for some time as “mesmerism” or “animal magnetism,” until the name “hypnosis” was added by Dr.

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19 This process of mediating deeply informs Ribot’s Affective Memory that Stanislavski adapted to his own uses in his early work.
20 Stanislavski and Benedetti 18.
23 Whyman 115-23.
James Braid in 1852.\textsuperscript{24} It had long been thought that this phenomenon was almost magical, that it introduced an entirely altered state of consciousness and a loss of individual will. William James described it as a brain-centered (hence natural) phenomenon that could be defined by a certain set of observable prerequisite conditions that could be called a “trance-state.”\textsuperscript{25} James makes no attempt to describe how such a hypnotic state occurs, though he does describe various methods by which hypnotic operators attempt to induce it. Since he cannot define the state itself in neurological terms, he instead lists various “symptoms” that can be found or produced.\textsuperscript{26}

In a hypnotic state, subjects can dissociate the “real” world from their hypnotic world, forgetting (once brought out of hypnosis) that they had been led through “liveliest hallucinations and dramatic performances.”\textsuperscript{27} They are also highly suggestible, accepting as fact the stimuli and commands given them by the operator, whether or not what they are told is factually true. Subjects can be made to believe any number of hallucinations that can take auditory or visual form, or even false memories and altered personality traits. Within this state, subjects can (when suggested) spontaneously set body functions in motion that normally would not be consciously controlled.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, in a hypnotic state, a person can live or experience a life that is not their own, and do so bodily.

Modern thinking tends to discount hypnosis as a discrete phenomenon. James himself leaned that way, but could not find a way to discount the phenomenon and explain the observed qualities of subjects under hypnosis.\textsuperscript{29} Bernard Baars, writing a century later, reconciles the two.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{25} William James, \textit{The Principles of Psychology} 2 vols. (New York: Holt, 1923) II.601. \\
\textsuperscript{26} James II.602. \\
\textsuperscript{27} James II.602. \\
\textsuperscript{28} He includes on this list blushing, which calls to mind the famous blush of Eleonora Duse. \\
\textsuperscript{29} James II.599-601.
\end{flushright}
Baars builds directly off of James’s “inspired” work, *Principles of Psychology*, and uses it as a major foundation for *In the Theater of Consciousness*.\(^{30}\)

Baars calls hypnosis an example of a “suggestible state,” which is, in turn, one variety of an “absorbed state.” He defines this suggestible state simply as one wherein stimuli contrary to an impulse or command are ignored: in his words, “suggestion is *merely the ordinary functioning of consciousness without the added mental operation of self-doubt.*”\(^{31}\) In this way, the hallucinations observed under hypnosis can be explained through the normal functioning of the mind. A subject can blush on command because she doesn’t doubt that she can. She tells her brain that she has received some stimulus that demands a blush, and the brain sends the appropriate signals to the body, regardless of whether or not the stimulus exists. Without any doubt as to the factuality of the stimulus, the body responds just as it normally would.

The larger concept from Baars, the “absorbed state,” is any state wherein we neglect outside stimuli that are irrelevant or deleterious to the task on which we wish to attend. Absorbed states can occur quite naturally in our everyday lives, whether it be reading, watching a compelling film, or speaking on a mobile phone. The rest of the world seems to fall away or become unimportant. This absorbed state is far from magical; we can be almost immediately roused from it at any time by any stimulus which we assume to be more important than the task at hand. A burning building will always outweigh a good book. If we don’t value a contrary stimulus as much as the source of our absorption, we leave it out of our consciousness. Thus a child playing a video game may truly only hear the parent’s call when he is hungry, and not before.

\(^{30}\) Baars 15  
\(^{31}\) Baars 104 (emphasis in original).
With this concept of the absorbed state, Baars gives us the clearest cognitive analog to Stanislavski’s *General Creative State*. The absorbed state is one where the world of the play may be honestly and spontaneously experienced while maintaining access to the actor’s offstage self when necessary. In Stanislavski’s estimation, a major portion of what we would call skill or talent in an actor is an ability to enter or reenter such an absorbed state with ease. As I show in the next chapter, most of the elements of his system are intended to very carefully extricate any sites of self-doubt that can be created by the mind or body. The *Creative State* can thus be defined as the absence of debilitating doubts (or, more broadly defined, any impulse contrary to the character’s life), which leaves behind the ability to become absorbed in the constructed world of the play.

**Relaxation, Belief, and the Sense of Truth – Addressing the Major Barriers**

In order for an actor to achieve this state, free of “self-doubt,” Stanislavski felt that competing information must be removed from the actor’s body and mind. For this reason, he places *Muscular Release* among the first elements of his System. “There can be no question of… the normal psychological life of a role while physical tension is present.”\(^\text{32}\) The basis for this belief can be said to be found not only in his personal experience, but in his study. Stanislavski, in his psychological study, was exposed to the James-Lange theory of emotion. Much of Theodule Ribot’s work was influenced by this, and he may have directly read on the subject, as it was a major movement of the time. Developed separately but coincidentally by Danish psychologist Carl Lange and William James, this theory suggests that what we experience as “emotion” is a contextualization of physical responses to stimuli. We tend to approach the connection between emotion and the body from the opposite direction. We think

\(^{32}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 121.
that we produce adrenaline, the heart races, and we perspire as a result of feeling fear. For James and Lange, that psychological phenomenon of “fear” was instead our way of explaining the sum total of those physical responses to ourselves. The psychological is a product of the physical – the two are inextricable. James and Stanislavski agreed that a psychological state could be a product of a physical state. In light of this, it follows that muscular release is not separate from mental openness, but an essential prerequisite. Muscular tension can be seen in this light as any physical locus of that “self-doubt” that could create an impassable barrier to the *Creative State*.

Physical tension is only one possible genesis of this self-doubt. It can also arise from the mind itself. There must be no purely mental barriers to the *Creative State*. This condition, freedom from psychological tension, is described by Stanislavski using the common concept of *belief*. Belief in the “artistic fiction” of the stage is not only a component of the *Creative State*; it is a prerequisite. 33 He uses the example of a prop knife to explain that, at its base, *belief* is a freedom from doubt. “If you’re troubled by the fact that his dagger is papier mâché and not steel…and stop believing life onstage is genuine, then set your mind at rest.” 34 The outcome of such belief is “the feeling which is born in the actor’s heart, stirred by a fiction, that is genuine and true.” 35

Stanislavski presents *belief* as inextricably linked with another concept, *truth*. Simply put, an actor’s *sense of truth* is a stand-in for what we might call, in our everyday lives, a “sense of fact.” In life, we constantly evaluate whether or not what we see is (f)actually happening. As actors enter the stage space *knowing* that what they are faced with is not fact, they must create a new rubric on which to judge phenomena. “Truth onstage is what we sincerely believe in our

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33 Stanislavski and Benedetti 153.
34 Stanislavski and Benedetti 153-4.
35 Stanislavski and Benedetti 153-4.
own and in our partners’ hearts.” Our sense of truth is our facility to evaluate stimuli and determine whether or not they violate our expectations about the world. If what we perceive onstage violates those expectations, our ability to believe is compromised. Without belief we are not free of that “self-doubt” that is essential to the Creative State. This belief can be violated by information that comes from either psychological or physical stimuli, as the two are alike in effect, if not form.

**Context Operators — the Magic “If” - Emotion Memory**

While belief is a major portion of an actor’s life, it is also a major segment of our everyday life. We must believe in the world around in order to interact with it. We could not proceed if we did not believe that the ground beneath our feet was solid, that our hand could open a door, or that the car approaching us will stop at a red light. Belief is, in nature, simply the assumption that what we perceive is fact. The sum total of these facts defines our reality.

According to Baars, “reality” is not a simple, inevitable phenomenon. It is rather the continuous output of a multitude of cognitive processes. We take in stimuli from the world around us and process them into a singular, unbroken experience of our world. This “private arena” of Consciousness is where reality exists for each of us. Stimuli aren’t helpful to us on their own. The information that enters our brain through the fovea (the relatively small area of the eye that can take in detailed information) is just an electrical signal until it is imbued by our brains with some sort of meaning. Our brain combines this signal with that generated by other coincident stimuli, including sounds, smells, tactile sensations, and the contents of our working memory, and attempts to categorize them — to find contexts where they naturally fit. It is through this process that we take light reflected from a page, and perceive that it makes a word, 

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36 Stanislavski and Benedetti 153-4.
37 Baars 40.
which in turn means a concept. Baars gives a very basic example, using the word “book.” The meaning of the word “book” can change, depending on the words around it.

“Compare the meaning you find in this word pair:

\[
\text{pages} \quad \text{book}
\]

With the meaning you find in this pair:

\[
\text{arrest} \quad \text{book}^3_{38}
\]

We perceive the word “book” to mean entirely different things based on what assumptions we are currently making about the world. These different possible associations that create meaning form what Baars termed “Context Operators.” Context Operators allow us to create meaning from stimuli – they provide associations that can reinforce, modify, or change outright the our expectations of meaning. For many of us, seeing “pages,” and then “book,” causes an image of a book to leap into our consciousness, even for the briefest of moments. When context operators are coincident with a stimulus, they belong to the subcategory Baars calls “local contexts.”^39

For an actor, the local context is, at its most basic level, the immediate experience of stage action – the sights, sounds, smells, and touches of life onstage. Actors continue this natural human process of meaning creation, whether the information they take in is from actors, scenery, or the audience. This, taken alone, presents a significant danger to the Creative State. Local contexts are in a fluid state of cooperation and competition for the control of meaning. Therefore, stimuli coming from outside the world of the play cannot be filtered out – noises from the audience are likely to violate the sense of truth and, by extension, the Creative State. We experience a similar dilemma in our daily lives – we must create meaning from more than just

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^38 Baars 119.
^39 Baars 42.
immediate stimuli. If this was not true, every person would, when faced with equivalent stimuli, respond exactly the same. Local contexts interact with broader, more long-term contexts made up of information perceived in the past. The sum total of these contexts creates a sort of super-context that encompasses the local with the global.

Baars defines this super-context within his theater metaphor; it is the “Director,” or what William James calls the “self-as-agent.” This Director context is our ability to control contexts to shape our experience. For an actor, this is the part of the mind that knows that this is a stage, and that the actor is performing for an audience. This context includes all of the mundane information of life offstage – grocery lists, producers or relatives in the audience, or the next line of dialogue. The Director is the seat of technique, for the actor-as-agent knows what is to come next, and processes local information accordingly. If an acting partner misses a line, is physically out of place, or changes an element of stage combat, the Director can guide future action to set things back on the rehearsed plan.

These two contexts can be enough for an actor to perform. An actor can exist entirely on technique and attention, staying entirely out of absorbed states. This would derive a type of technical acting that Stanislavski called “the art of representation.” This art was worthy of respect in its own right, but was, in its way, antithetical to Stanislavski’s goals. Representational actors don’t believe that nature can be recreated onstage. Things can be experienced in rehearsal, and the external behaviors of those experiences can be reproduced before an audience by an actor who is fully conscious that he is always before an audience. This is the formulation argued for by Diderot – the actor remains unmoved in order to move others. Stanislavski wants something different. Rather than the art of representation, he believes that it is both possible and

40 Baars 42, 143.
41 Stanislavski and Benedetti 22.
necessary for actors to experience the life of the role itself, and to enter the Creative State. In order to accomplish this, a new set of contexts must be created that will produce in the actor meaning similar to that of the author’s character.

In Figure 1 on page 29 we can see that, in Baars’s estimation, experience and overall meaning is created through the layering of multiple contexts, from immediate to existential. The multiple layers do not oppose each other, but rather build upon and modify the affects of each. Immediate contexts provide meaning on one level, but are also affected by longer term goals and lifelong values. What we think of as “self” is essentially the sum total of these stratified contexts.

Baars’s model does directly not take into account the demands of mimesis, as he is primarily interested in the human mind in everyday life. However, if we accept that an actor achieves belief in the world of the play using the same functional constructs as he does for the world outside, we can resolve this difference rather easily. We need only think of the mimetic world as a specific set of added contexts between the local and the Director, as shown in Figure 2 on page 31. These mimetic contexts would privilege certain bits of local information over others without violating the director’s input. The actor must take stimuli that come in locally, and produce a context around them that produces a mimetic reality that can be lived in as if it is natural. This mimetic context must produce within them a meaning most like that of the character they play. This would seem to create an almost irresolvable tension, for the imaginary or mimetic context would seem to violate what the self-as-agent, that top tier context, knows to be true. If the actor attempts to deny that tension, only two options are available:

1. The actor succeeds. If the actor succeeds in completely denying the self-as-agent, their own sense of self, the result would be a pathological dissociation from reality.
2. The actor fails. If the actor resists that tension and fails, the result would be a violation of the sense of truth, which would preclude an absorbed or Creative State.

Stanislavski found a third way – a way to affect the meaning produced by local contexts without violating the self. He called it the “Magic If.” Actors can behave “as if” what they experience is factual.

This magic if resolves many of the conflicts the actor faces. It allows actors to enter an absorbed state, but equally allows them to take in the technical information they need to function safely. Stanislavski never asked actors to entirely forget themselves. Actors are, in fact, explicitly enjoined from attempting to do so in An Actor’s Work. They are instructed, rather, to find the life of the character within themselves. They move forward with “two perspectives, one belonging to the role, the other to the actor himself.” If we accept that Stanislavski intended to mimic nature, it follows that any explanation or exploration must begin with what we know of nature. Our experience of a mimetic reality should, to great extent, mimic our experience of factual reality.

Construction of such a mimetic context is, as Stanislavski noted, far more common in children than adults. When his stand-in character, Tortsov, first introduces the possibility of a mimetic context, he tells a story of a child actor. The little girl he tells his students of is required to hold a baby. The correct prop isn’t available, so she is given a piece of wood. Once she is told that the piece of wood is her “baby,” she mentally contextualizes it as such, and treats it not different than she would a flesh-and-blood child. This process is almost instantaneous for the girl Tortsov describes, but, as Stanislavski acknowledged, this ability was difficult for socialized

42 Stanislavski and Benedetti 49.
43 Stanislavski and Benedetti 53.
44 Stanislavski and Benedetti 460.
45 Stanislavski and Benedetti 155.
adults. The permission we grant ourselves to contradict fact in favor of truth is inherent in the magic if. We can, with training, make use of Context Operators that we have intentionally constructed just as we use those we have built up through experience.

A concept related to Baars’s understanding of context operators shows up in one of the most contentious ideas Stanislavski ever put forth – Emotion Memory. It was originally known in his work as Affective Memory, which was a concept taken directly from Ribot.\textsuperscript{46} Affective Memory, often erroneously conflated with Emotion Memory, is the ability of the actor to put himself into a specific emotional state like one he’s experienced before. It was the cornerstone of the American version of Stanislavski’s work known as “The Method.” Later on in Stanislavski’s career, he ceased using this particular exercise, but retained the basic concept in a way both broader and qualitatively distinct. He distinguished it through the new term Emotion Memory.\textsuperscript{47}

Affective Memory was the ability to call forth a specific emotion using memories of the past. Emotion Memory is the ability of an actor to have emotions similar to those previously experienced to be stirred by present action. This difference is qualitative and subtle when put into writing, but its effects are enormous. The focus of the actor’s attention is not the emotion, but the action. With Emotion Memory, Stanislavski believes actors should train themselves to be aroused in the present in a way similar to past arousals. In Baarsian terms, actors should train themselves to form associations between local stimuli and long-term personal experience, thus creating a new and lively context for meaning.

The way he asks actors to train their Emotion Memory is also significant in this study. Following closely on the James-Lange theory of emotion (that heavily influenced Ribot),

\textsuperscript{46} Stanislavski and Benedetti 197.
\textsuperscript{47} By the time Stanislavski put his ideas into writing, he had left Affective Memory behind.
Stanislavski asks actors to recall sensory experiences in order to prime their *Emotion Memory*. In *An Actor’s Work*, he takes students through several sensory exercises, stimulating emotion using sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations. This is quintessential William James and Lange, who felt that emotion wasn’t just associated with bodily sensations, it was the direct result of those sensations. If our heart racing is the cause of what we call “fear,” it follows easily that we will associate other sensations (the sight of an animal charging us, the prick of a doctor’s needle) with that same emotion.

*Emotion Memory*, as it stood by the time Stanislavski died (and which is clear in Benedetti’s 2008 translation), is an intuition of context operators at work. An actor with a good *Emotion Memory* is one who can readily create the associative contexts necessary for “the life of the human spirit.” Such an actor could contextualize mimetic input and be emotionally alive without extensive concentration on the production of that emotion (counter to many misunderstandings of the System).

The place that the mimetic context occupies is clear – it stands between the specific stimuli of the moment and the long-term “self” of the actor. Figure 2 demonstrates how this might be considered. In this way, an actor can become absorbed within that context, just as we often become absorbed in specific stimuli: a book, a song, a phone call taken while driving. Adding this understanding of contexts and associations to our understanding of the *Creative State*, I offer a slight extension to Baars. Baars’s primary assertion of the Absorbed State deals with our ability to resist stimuli that might needlessly interrupt us. This resistance is an expression of attention (dealt with more in Chapter 2), but it requires specific contextual preconditions. According to Baars, “absorption may make it momentarily impossible to
disbelieve.” For absorption to lead to “wishful fantasy” implies that we not only attend to a specific subset of available stimuli, but we also privilege the context operators that produce in us meaning that supports that fantasy. The Creative State of Stanislavski must include both constructed contexts and a measure of control over Attention. Both must be provided for in the System. To demonstrate this, I will start with the constructed context operators that an actor uses to create meaning within the mimetic environment of a stage performance. Stanislavski prescribed some specific ways to develop these contexts that can provide the actor with guidance toward the Creative State.

Constructing a Context: Justification and Given Circumstances

This Magic If, this constructed context between self and situation, is not built out of whole cloth, but on the foundation given by the playwright. Indeed, the If is hardly a singular occurrence within any given performance. Any mimetic world is constructed out of dozens, if not hundreds, of similar Ifs. The overall fiction of the production is constructed of little fictions. These aggregated Ifs, for the actor, are part of the Given Circumstances. “One is a hypothesis (‘If’), the other is a corollary to it (the Given Circumstances).”

The Given Circumstances are the blunt facts of the production, coupled with the associations given them by the actors. As Stanislavski himself listed:

“They mean the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of the action, the way of life, how we as actors and directors understand the play, the contributions we

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48 Baars 103.
49 Baars 103.
50 Stanislavski and Benedetti 53.
ourselves make, the mise-en-scene, the sets and costumes, the props, the stage dressing, the sound effects etc., etc., everything which is a given for the actors as they rehearse.\textsuperscript{51}

*Given Circumstances*, as a concept, combines reality and fiction into a singular construct, just as Baars’s model of overlapping contexts does. Within the *Given Circumstances* are all the demands that allied artists place on the actor, as well as the contributions of other artists on the actor’s person. All of these things must be carefully and holistically combined so that they can arouse the *Emotion Memory* and not jar the actor out of the *Creative State*.

According to one tenet of Stanislavski, “stage action must be inwardly well-founded, in proper, logical sequence and possible in the real world.”\textsuperscript{52} This particular admonishment betrays another intuition about absorbed states: they’re quite easy to destroy. Absorption is experience without self-doubt. However, parts of our brains (Baars acknowledges Endel Tulving’s work on the hippocampus) perform the primary job of “mismatch-detection,” noting things that are not expected. These surprises can jar us out of an absorbed state in as little as three hundred milliseconds.\textsuperscript{53} The evolutionary reason for this is clear – if we are focused on a compelling book, we will survive much longer if we can quickly respond to the bookshelf that is falling on top of us. The incongruity must capture our attention in order to be dealt with.

Stanislavski’s demand for *Logic* and *Sequence* stems from the need for the actor to reproduce physical and psychological life as it is. In a later chapter devoted entirely to the subject, Stanislavski begins with a real-world example of pouring a glass of water. If we don’t remove the stopper from the carafe before pouring, we won’t be successful in our goal.\textsuperscript{54} Just as in life, stage action (whether physical or psychophysical) must have an internal logic. For the

\textsuperscript{51} Stanislavski and Benedetti 52-53.
\textsuperscript{52} Stanislavski and Benedetti 48.
\textsuperscript{53} Baars 107.
\textsuperscript{54} Stanislavski and Benedetti 507.
realistic theater that dominated Stanislavski’s time, this logic was usually causal – a chain of events. To violate this causality would, in psychophysical terms, be like kissing someone, then falling in love with them, and then meeting them. Our brains are designed to note such incongruities and preclude absorption.

This might seem, on its face, to preclude any theater other than the naturalist style that the Moscow Art Theater (following the Meinenger) was most known for. Certainly at the time of Stanislavski’s writing, that could be taken as true. He was not, in the days of Stalin and Socialist Realism, encouraged to consider flights of fancy. Materialist drama would abhor Given Circumstances that are far removed from the logic of everyday life. Stanislavski did not ask only for a reproduction of everyday life, however. He only sought to use the mechanics of everyday life so as to be as specific as possible in creating life onstage. He is, at moments, at variance with himself, as he struggles to reconcile the idea of an illogical world as it might be logically reproduced for the actor. He treats such situations as special cases: “A lack of sequence and logic is, of course acceptable in such cases but for the rest of the time we must absolutely ensure that everything is logical and sequential.”

If we remove these thoughts from a wholly materialist mindset, we can find harmony. Another concept from earlier in An Actor’s Work provides the mechanism for this – through action and supertask. According to Stanislavski, each moment of stage action cannot exist entirely on its own. Sequence and logic for an actor must be determined by a single overriding goal that can sustain the actor from the first moment of action through to the end. This supertask provides the impetus for each specific moment of work, and gives it an internal logic. This Supertask a broader mimetic context for the actor; just as in Figure 1 we see that

55 Stanislavski and Benedetti 509.
56 Stanislavski and Benedetti p. 313.
humans are driven in part by what Baars calls Deep Goal Contexts, characters are driven by larger, more overriding goals. This Supertask can help create a singular personal narrative, a throughline, even if the causality of everyday life falls by the wayside. Provided each If, building up into the Given Circumstances, does not violate the others, this throughline can provide a way for actors to find an internal logic and sequence. This self-consistency can provide a logic the actor can believe in, even if the logic of the offstage world can no longer apply. Thus an actor can believe in a world where people speak in verse, or even sing and dance to express themselves. The rules of the outside world can be violated, but the actor can believe in all manner of mimetic fantasy provided that he can find or construct some consistency in the world of that fantasy. An Absorbed State doesn’t require reality; it requires consistency and a certain manner of predictability.

This chapter only gives us the “Backstage” of the Theater of Consciousness. Even if all of these elements of the System are in place, it can only hope to prepare the actor for an Absorbed or Creative State. Indeed, much of the work discussed so far is preparatory – an emptying of deleterious input from consciousness. Consciousness cannot be a true “empty space,” however. To be alive is to be conscious, and if an actor is to perform, that Consciousness must be filled with something. Chapter Two analyzes the role of Consciousness within the System, and discusses how Stanislavski intended for it to be occupied during performance within the Creative State.
Fig. 1. Overlapping contexts that create meaning. From Baars, 144.
Fig. 2. Baars’s contextual model adapted to the System.
Chapter 2
The Stage: Consciousness and Attention in the Actor

Chapter 1 dealt with the Creative State as a prerequisite condition for the System, and how a set of contexts can be constructed that allow the actor to respond to immediate stimuli in a way appropriate to the play. Cognitively speaking, the Absorbed state is a state of consciousness. In Bernard Baars’s theater model, Consciousness is the show itself – the goal of the entire exercise. Chapter Two deals with consciousness as a phenomenon, and how an actor shapes and guides his onstage experience to fulfill the technical needs of the play while living in the Creative State.

What is Consciousness?

Consciousness, as a phenomenon, is one of the oldest preoccupations of philosophers. It is a universal phenomenon – our experience of existence, our own “private arena” of experienced life.\(^57\) It remains difficult to define, with boundaries that expand in lockstep with our imaginations. We can see this difficulty continue to present itself by following Baars’s own historical examples, for how can we conceive of a limit to our own conception?\(^58\)

This difficulty proved a saving grace for Rene Descartes. By systematically denying everything that he could doubt, he stripped objective reality down to almost nothing. Our senses could lie to us, and beliefs that are taught can be unreliable. The one thing he found that he could not discount was the very fact that he was asking the question, and was therefore conscious. This use of consciousness as the sole basis for reality had an unavoidable corollary; it

\(^{57}\) Baars 40.
\(^{58}\) Baars traces his idea of consciousness through Descartes and James. I follow his examples the following section, highlighting points important to actors.
bifurcated the entire world into things that occupied consciousness, and things that did not. In Descartes’ estimation, this divided his self (and by extension, the world), into his mind, where his consciousness resided, and his body, which did not. His *cogito*, and the mind/body split it implied, put into words an idea that echoed Plato and Aristotle, and dominated thinking about thought for centuries, up to and including William James. James’s expansive analysis continues this assumption that the world is divided into two realms: the self/conscious/mind, and the not-self/unconscious/body.

For Bernard Baars, William James (and, by extension, Descartes) is still the primary foundational authority on consciousness, even as he and many others build upon it. Advances in experimentation and analysis have built upon James in many ways, but also broken with him. James sees consciousness as the sole expression of cognition, and that anything unconscious is purely physical, thus reinforcing the mind-body split of Descartes. One of the major advances is the ability to study cognition that occurs both with and without consciousness. Baars, an acknowledged leader in the field, calls this the ability to “treat consciousness as a variable.” Scientists can study both the presence and absence of consciousness, with interesting results. The absence of consciousness has some verifiable consequences, but these do not include a complete absence of cognition. The cognition without consciousness can be described as the cognitive unconscious. Acknowledgement of a cognitive unconscious disproves James’s boundary, but also clarifies the discussion in fascinating ways. By removing the mind/body split of Descartes from our conception of consciousness/unconsciousness, we can establish new insights into acting theory.

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59 It is worth considering that another major contribution of William James, the James-Lange Theory of Emotion, would seem to be at odds with a dualistic view of mind, as the cognitive effect (emotion) is a direct product of the body.
60 Baars 11. Baars is also co-editor of the volume *Essential Resources in the Study of Consciousness*, which contains the work of many other top researchers.
By treating consciousness as a variable, as Baars suggests, we can acknowledge it as a condition that is neither indispensable nor arbitrary. This variable quality renders the conscious/unconscious distinction as inessential and porous. Cognitive processes can be conscious at one time, and unconscious at another. Baars cites biofeedback experiments as an example of this porous border. Patients attached to electroencephalographs (EEGs) can quickly learn to reproduce specific brainwaves at will, regardless of any behavioral analogue to that brainwave. In other words, an essentially physical process, the production of alpha waves, can be consciously controlled, even though it usually happens entirely unconsciously. Baars posits that virtually any process could be accessed by the conscious brain, including heart function and intestinal movement.\textsuperscript{61} For everyday purposes, he acknowledges it would be “absurd“ to do so. This broad range of access has fascinating implications for actors, who must attempt cognitive and bodily manipulations that would appear equally absurd to the external viewer.

This shift from the Cartesian barrier to the Baarsian variable can be traced in acting theory as well. In acting theory, the nearest analog to Descartes must be considered to be Denis Diderot. \textit{Paradoxe sur la Comedien} has had a towering influence on acting theory that is as influential today as Descartes. His \textit{Paradoxe} deals primarily with emotion, but is entirely founded on Cartesian assumptions. He rejects emotion in large part because the actor’s mind need not be employed. For him, masterful acting is a purely physical exercise: “Like other gymnastics, it taxes only his bodily strength.”\textsuperscript{62} A good performance entails “exertion without feeling.”\textsuperscript{63} Diderot’s entire argument rests on Cartesian binaries: mind/body, emotion/intellect, conscious/unconscious.

\textsuperscript{61} Baars 58-59.
\textsuperscript{62} Diderot p. 19.
\textsuperscript{63} Diderot 19.
By the late nineteenth century, this bifurcation was already breaking down. Even before the James-Lange theory began to trouble the split, William Archer, by gathering both empirical and anecdotal evidence, came to directly oppose Diderot, and to believe that the self was not a unified conscious experience, but rather a collection of multiple trains of thought, action and consciousness. This multitude explained for Archer how an actor can truly feel without losing track of reality. William James admired Archer’s methods, and used his work (and the debate he was part of) as significant evidence about the nature of emotion.64

Stanislavskii may not have been directly aware of Archer, but he was certainly aware of Diderot. During his first studies that developed the System, Stanislavskii read Diderot, and decided that he must take the Paradoxe into account.65 Stanislavskii certainly agreed with Diderot on some points of theatrical tastes. Much of Diderot’s argument is intended to discredit the overly indulgent actors of the time, for whom emotion was an end unto itself. Stanislavskii certainly eschewed emotional frenzy for its own sake; he built his system on action, rather than feeling. On many other points, however, the two would be at intellectual loggerheads.

Diderot’s masterful actor is, in the end, precisely what Stanislavskii wished to banish from the stage. Diderot’s actor was steep in the passage of memorized gesture and cliché from acclaimed master to anointed apprentice. This tradition (alive in both Russia and much of Europe) had created a self-sustaining theater of gestural semiotics that choked the life out of the theater for Stanislavskii. This tradition, which owed much to Diderot, gave us what Stanislavskii called the art of representation. Stanislavskii openly respected this tradition for the certain amount of artisanship it required. He thought more was both possible and necessary, and sought

64 James II.464.
65 Carnicke 135.
to build an art form around spontaneous “experiencing” that could be repeated anew for every performance without sacrificing the technical mastery Diderot demanded.

Stanislavski’s solution to Diderot echoes Archer. Stanislavski believes that an actor fully experiencing the role will “live a double life.” One of these lives is concerned with the role, or the mimetic life of the character, and is “moving towards the Supertask, the Through-action, the Subtext, mental images, the Creative State, and the other half is concerned with your \textit{psychotechnique} and Adaptations[.].” He, like Salvini and Archer, sees the self as a split entity that is conscious of two complete paths of experience.

Modern thought fulfills the observations of Stanislavski, but discounts the idea of a split self or double life. For Baars, a self that is truly split in two can only be pathologized as a dissociative disorder; this is hardly what actors do on a regular basis. If actors did dissociate—truly become someone else and forget themselves entirely—the fears of Diderot would be confirmed, and number of disastrous consequences would begin to play out. Hamlets the world over would commit multiple murders in performance. As this is not so, we must explain the split self in a different way.

If the actor in performance only truly has one self, she truly has only one consciousness. The technical details as well as Stanislavski’s art of “experiencing” cohabit an actor’s consciousness – that “Stage” of Working Memory. An actor must be, on some level, engaged with the realities of stage combat, movement, gesture, and other technical needs. Just as in Chapter 1, we could see a self created through layered contexts that can encompass a mimetic

\begin{itemize}
\item [66] Stanislavski and Benedetti 456, quoting Tomasso Salvini. Salvini was also one of Archer’s most famous respondents.
\item [67] Stanislavski and Benedetti 456. Emphasis added.
\end{itemize}
world without replacing it, so too can the stage of consciousness contain processes at seeming cross purposes.

The resolution of these purposes is twofold. First, the mechanics of these technical realities – the production of minute details required of gesture, voice, and text – are relegated to the cognitive unconscious. The experience of these technical realities within the performative moment does occupy part of our working memory. In other words, the actor may be conscious that he has raised his arm to strike another person onstage, but he is not conscious of the hundred technical details required to do this in a manner that is safe, consistent, and consonant with the needs of the lighting designer. The cognitive unconscious will be dealt with in the next chapter. What remains is that experience of embodiment – the ways in which physicality and text inform the present. If these things became perpetually central to an actor’s work, the creative/absorbed state would likely not last long, as the actor would be wholly absorbed unto herself. We know this is not true; actors are, and must be, acutely aware of outside stimuli. How can they be conscious of both?

The answer to this lies within the absorbed state itself. While the last chapter dealt with absorption and its effect on contextualization, it is primarily an expression of the organization of consciousness. That Stage of Working Memory can have many actors on it, but they are not all of equal effect. Some occupy the center of consciousness, some the edges. This center of consciousness, this primary focus of our present experience, is the phenomenon of attention.

Attention: Circle/Spotlight

A number of actors can occupy the stage in Baars’s model. Each is a process – a recollection, an action, or the receipt of an incoming stimulus. Scientists estimate how many things can occupy our Working Memory, with numbers ranging anywhere from 4 to eleven.
While the stage may contain all these things, they neither carry equal weight nor do they always occupy the same position in our consciousness. The stage has, for Baars, a “Spotlight” that moves from actor to actor, causing whatever it shines on to become the primary focus of our consciousness. We have a great (if not absolute) measure of control over this Spotlight. This Spotlight is what we know of as attention.

According to Baars, William James gave a functional definition of attention which still founds current discourse. Baars quotes his definition: “Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possibly objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness are its essence.”

James identified this phenomenon as “selective attention,” in that he thought attention was purely the things of which we wish to be conscious. While Baars agrees, that selection process is often so quick that we are not aware of it. The absorbed state mentioned in the preceding chapter is also a state of attention, in that we choose to focus on one phenomenon or subset of phenomena. However, if we encounter a stimulus that supersedes the absorbed context in importance, we immediately attend to it in as little as 300 milliseconds.

We aren’t aware of the selection, but the Director context, the Self-as-Agent, demands that we attend to the fact that we are in a burning room at the expense of the novel we’re reading.

Attention is the act of directing the central focus of consciousness. It is the difference between “‘looking’ versus ‘seeing,’ ‘listening’ versus ‘hearing,’ ‘touching’ versus ‘feeling, and maybe even ‘sniffing’ versus ‘smelling.’” Attention is our agency in the realm of consciousness. This Spotlight is directed by our values – the meanings that we produce in the

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68 Baars 95. Quoting James I.403-4.
69 Baars 107.
70 Baars 98.
“backstage” contextual processes. It is also the phenomenon that most directly effects those contexts.

The “Spotlight” of attention can move from actor to actor at astonishing speed. These shifts can occur so quickly that we stop differentiating between different stimuli, and they combine in our perception into a singular blended concept. The connection between two concepts is most easily created if they occupy our attention in close succession. They combine into a singular blended concept.\(^7\)

The Spotlight of attention can also hold a singular position for an extended period of time. This steady state, when it occurs, is the attentive portion of an absorbed state. I argued in Chapter 1 that absorption can be put to use on contexts themselves – that an actor can remain aware of certain associations and ignorant of others. This is an extension of Baars’s absorbed state; it is, at its root, a phenomenon of attention. The absorbed state is, more broadly put, a condition wherein a person (or actor) keeps the Spotlight of attention focused on certain stimuli and not others. A driver taking a phone call becomes absorbed in the call itself, and not the mechanics of driving.

Attention is not the limit of consciousness, as the above example demonstrates. That driver on a phone call continues to drive, even as he enters an absorbed state. Drivers will report being vaguely aware of road conditions – other traffic, turns and curves. They are conscious of these conditions, even as they do not directly attend to them. They occupy what Baars calls “Fringe Consciousness.” We are vaguely aware of these other things we do – they do not become completely unconscious. They do not occupy the center of our world, however, and they become less prominent parts of our local contexts.

\(^7\) Gilles Fauconnier has written extensively on this phenomenon of “conceptual blending.”
Stanislavski intuited this concept in an extraordinarily explicit way. He saw it primarily as a spatial phenomenon. According to him, actors can, with training, attend to parts of the physical world around them and not others. When writing about this ability and the exercises used to train it, he used a Spotlight. He used the physical object that would, almost a century later, become a metaphorical object for Baars.

Stanislavski opens his chapter “Concentration and Attention” with a disturbing revelation for Kostya, his protagonist. The classroom he has grown accustomed to is rather abruptly transformed into a theater stage, as the large curtains that had theretofore comprised one wall of the room are opened, leaving behind a “black hole” that pulls his attention off the action of the exercise.\(^{72}\)

Tortsov, the teacher, acknowledges the pull of the audience space. His immediate solution is to enrich the Given Circumstances of the current exercise. He describes a tragic scene that includes two deaths and the loss of a huge sum of money, all of which occur in a few minutes time. His goal is to make the onstage (mimetic) circumstances outweigh the factual circumstances of the theater building. “If this tragedy does not take your mind off the black hole, it means you have hearts of stone.”\(^{73}\) Stanislavski focuses his training of attention on a universal acting phenomenon – the audience. If the Creative State is to be achieved and maintained, and actor must not attend to the audience while still being conscious of it. While Given Circumstances are one way out, he wishes to train actors to develop this attention control as a standalone skill.

The central problem in developing this skill is that attention is a positive force, not a negative one. It is impossible to reliably ignore a phenomenon; once a person concentrates on

\(^{72}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 86.
\(^{73}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 88.
ignoring a stimulus, that very concentration makes ignorance impossible. Stanislavski elaborates and explicates his original suggestion – the use of *Given Circumstances*. “[T]o divert your attention from the audience, you must become engrossed in what is happening onstage.”\(^74\) He demonstrates this skill in a peculiarly Baarsian way – through the use of Spotlights.

Tortsov (as Stanislavski’s voice) confronts his actors with a completely dark stage, and uses light fixtures to demonstrate how their attention can be trained in space. He allows only a single light fixture, a table lamp, to be lit. This creates a small pool of light, barely large enough to cover Kostya’s hands, face, and the table itself. This creates what Tortsov calls the *circle of attention*. This circle “represents not a single point but a definite small area with many different objects in it. The eye can jump from one to another but never crosses the circumference of the circle.”\(^75\) The student, Kostya, recognizes that the rest of the stage and the auditorium are “lost in an awesome gloom.” In the circle of attention, an actor can “forget the fact that in the darkness, on every side, many strange eyes are watching you living.”\(^76\)

The *circle of attention* is conducive to true experiencing, as an actor lets fall away all matters external to the stage in favor of the *Given Circumstances*. The fictional lesson presented seems to introduce a new problem, however. If an actor truly “forgets” that the audience is present, she would be said to relegate the fact of the audience to the cognitive unconscious. If she is not conscious of it, she would likely be in danger of that dissociation from self that would come from losing the fact of performance. In the same lesson Tortsov/Stanislavski gives us a clue as to how this tension can be resolved.

\(^{74}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 92.
\(^{75}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 98.
\(^{76}\) Stanislavski and Benedetti 99.
If the actor feels truly alone in the circle, and is completely unaware of the factual world, we could consider that a state of mental solitude. The facts may be that the actor is not alone, but he would experience a mental state indistinguishable from actual solitude. This state, real solitude, is not Stanislavski’s goal. The state an actor is in within the *circle of attention* is called instead *public solitude*. In a brilliant extension of the magic “if,” he implies that an actor behaves in public *as if* he is alone. The key to unlocking this *if* is attention. The actor may be aware of the audience, but he leaves it outside his circle of attention. He is still somewhat aware of these facts outside the mimetic construct of the *Given Circumstances*, as they continue to be immediate stimuli. He does not attend to them, and instead remains in an absorbed state, attending only to those stimuli that are part of the mimetic reality of his onstage life. The audience remains within the actor’s Fringe Consciousness, causing a real if almost indiscernible effect on the actor’s performance.

This view of attention and absorption is absolutely in lockstep with Baars, with only a tiny intellectual leap. As Kostya describes his eyes darting from object to object on the table, he is recalling not the objects themselves, but the cognitive processes involved in looking at each of those objects. He is describing an absorbed state, where attention is only directed at a discrete subset of the processes that occupy Working Memory. Stanislavski, writing decades before Baars, intuited that this was possible, and used it as the very foundation of his work. For, if we accept that Stanislavski intended some version of the Baarsian theater, we can extrapolate this out to the rest of an actor’s job without much exertion. For, if we accept that Stanislavski believed this possible for one subset of cognitive processes (those dealing with the visual

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77 Stanislavski and Benedetti 98.
recognition of objects in space), we can see a world where an actor does the same with other processes.

The confluence of Stanislavski’s “Circle” with Baars’s “Spotlight” is the final piece to fall into place. From here on, we can describe an actor at work within the system as a human being living within, or experiencing, the creative/absorbed state. Her attention is absorbed into a discrete subset of stimuli – all those necessary to the mimetic world of the play. This Spotlight of attention may swing around wildly, and move from process to process in mere fractions of a second. All the possible targets of that Spotlight will be those actors/processes on the stage of Working Memory that can be consonant with the mimetic context of the Given Circumstances. In this way an actor can remain absorbed in the stimuli and associations necessary to the play, without fully losing conscious touch with offstage reality. We know from Baars that any stimulus outside this state that must occupy an actor’s attention will do so. Any emergency or extreme variation from expected experience can draw any person out of an absorbed state in as little as 300 milliseconds. No true dissociation form self is necessary. The “dual selves” Stanislavski wrote of (following Salvini and Archer) are simply the processes that may, and may not, occupy the Spotlight of attention within the Creative State.

There are now three possible loci for the cognitive processes necessary to an actor’s work. They can occupy the cognitive unconscious, which we shall explore in the next chapter. They can be on the stage of Working Memory, yet not attended to, as all immediate stimuli that are not part of the Given Circumstances are. They can finally be attended to, and become conscious experience. From here on out we can deal with the actors themselves; the processes and concepts that become conscious experience.

78 Baars 107.
"The Actors:” Processes That Compete for Attention

Many things can occupy the Working Memory for a short time, and they compete for or cooperate to occupy attention. According to Baars, these players on the stage of working memory can include information from our outer senses – vision, hearing, smell, taste, and the full range of somatic input (position, pressure, temperature, pain, and so on). Our inner senses, those bits of information that originate entirely inside us, are also present – inner speech, visual imagery, imagined feelings, and dreams. The stage may also contain ideas – abstractions that can occupy us. In this category, Baars includes Fringe conscious contents, intuitions, verbalized ideas, and intangible ideas.

Stimuli can cooperate, provided they can be contextualized as a singular experience. Examples of this include seeing someone speak while listening to them, or smelling food while tasting it. Even if some cooperate, cognitive actors within Working Memory will compete for attention, with our backstage contexts helping to determine where the Spotlight will shine. Most of the players that Baars lists will not be central to our consciousness at any given time. Stanislavski’s Creative State privileges a certain subset of players.

Subtext & Mental Images

We know that the “dual selves” Stanislavski described are impossible without dissociation. While his concept of “self” breaks down, the bifurcation of experience it implies does not. We can divide the actor’s mind instead into two categories – things that the actor is fully conscious of (i.e. anything inside the Spotlight of Attention) and things he is not fully conscious of (Fringe Consciousness and Cognitive Unconscious). Of the four concepts he assigns to the attentive, conscious self, two of them – subtext and mental images – don’t occupy

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79 Baars 63.
80 all examples are from Baars 42.
a central place in An Actor’s Work, but they are more than evident in his thinking. The phrase “mental images” appears no less than eighty times in Benedetti’s compilation, and “subtext” shows up twelve times. He takes these concepts for granted; they are natural parts of our human nature. It follows that they will be part of our human effort to reproduce nature.

Baars would agree with this assessment. These two phenomena are explicitly dealt with in his work. Subtext is a concept well known to actors – it is the act of translating the surface text of the character into the psychological text that lies underneath. Torstov describes it as “all manner of feelings, wants, thoughts, intentions, creative ideas, aural and visual images, and other sensory experiences” that go on within the actor underneath the words themselves. It relies upon the notion that spoken words can, at best, approximate what occurs in the brain. In the most ideal of communicative circumstances, subtext and text would unite, and any meaning communicated would be the exact meaning intended. Most times this is not true in nature, and is not true on stage. Stanislavski counseled the use of subtext as the final connection between actor and text. By investing text with subtext, actors “establish [their] relationship to people and the circumstances of their lives.” They can then “reshape it, give it life, fill it with our own imagination.” Subtext is the translation of outer speech into inner meaning.

Mental images are a virtually identical concept. Subtext is the creation of text-beneath-the-text; mental images are visions-beneath-vision. If we accept that actors live within a mimetic world, we must accept that they must compensate for things that they cannot factually see. Mental imagery is such a common tool to accomplish this that Stanislavski virtually takes it for granted. Imagery is another “if” that an actor may use – a specifically visual one. At one point, an actor is ordered by Tortsov to light a fire in the papier mache fireplace on the stage of their

81 Stanislavski and Benedetti 402.
82 Stanislavski and Benedetti 54.
classroom. The student wonders how to do so without matches. Tortsov replies, “What! Do you want to burn the place down?” in order for the actor to specifically act as “if” the fireplace is real, he must see it as real. The actor, Grisha, does not stop seeing the prop, yet his mental image of a brick and mortar fireplace must coexist with it.

These two Stanislavskian concepts, subtext and mental imagery, are quite compatible with Bernard Baars’s work. Baars discusses Imagery and Self-Talk which are remarkably similar concepts. Baars reminds us that many of us have a constant internal monologue – a sort of play-by-play announcer who guides us through the business of existing. Baars considers Inner Speech, or Self-Talk, an actor on the stage of consciousness. This voice is virtually always present, even as it darts in and out of our attention. To borrow from his example, I need only point out that, as the reader’s eye follows the text of this paragraph, she likely hears a voice reciting the text in her head. We are conscious of this inner speech while reading, even as we don’t attend to it on a regular basis. Other times, it occupies the center of our attention, as we work out a problem, or rehearse our side of an upcoming conversation. Brain imaging studies support the idea that the mental processes that produce the content of this mental speech are similar to those that provide external speech. Our brains don’t necessarily distinguish between inner and outer speech.

Imagery functions in a similar fashion. Baars tells us that a common old phrase, “the mind’s eye,” that describes this phenomenon is curiously apt. As we picture a particular image in our eye, we use the same parts of our brain that we would use to process the actual visual stimulus that would produce it in our lived experience. As with self-talk, these images can come unbidden into our brain, and occupy the fringes of the conscious stage. They can also grab the

83 Baars 75.
84 Baars 75.
spotlight of attention. As we think of the spotlight of attention, at work in the mind of an actor, it takes no great leap to picture Grisha’s spotlight of attention as it swings back and forth from the visual stimulus of the prop fireplace to his mental image of a brick one. This spotlight can swing between the two so quickly that the two concepts become, for all intents and purposes, a singular entity.

This direct use of subtext and mental imagery hearkens back to Chapter 1. By associating a real prop with an imaginary image, or the author’s word with the actor’s subtext, the actor explicitly creates a Local Context for the world of the play. The distinction between paper and brick fireplaces can break down, and the actor is able to find belief without violating the Creative State. Yet again, Stanislavski is training his students to reproduce things we do in nature in order to fulfill the needs of the play.

Action: Tasks & Supertasks

An actor solely absorbed in his internal life would be irretrievably dull for the viewer. Stanislavski recognized that all internal technique must be directed outward; embodiment was the ultimate end of the System. The Creative State is a receptive one, but it is not a passive one. “Acting is action. The basis of theater is doing, dynamism.”85 He goes on to clarify: “Acting is action – mental and physical.”86 The actor cannot experience the life of the human spirit on his own; he must do unto the world so that it may do unto him.

Stanislavski/Tortsov demonstrates that action is not purely physical. His student actors find themselves uninspired at the suggestion that they simply close a door. Tortsov adds to it a set of Given Circumstances (though he has not yet named them as such). The actors are told that a dangerous and unstable man is about to try to enter the room. The actors immediately jump to

85 Stanislavski and Benedetti 40. Emphasis in original.
86 Stanislavski and Benedetti 40.
perform the first physical action – shutting the door – and go on to perform dozens of others. They barricade the door, hide under furniture, and prepare themselves with weapons. All of this because the original physical action has been imbued with a psychological need, “to survive.” Kostya lacks the words at this point, but tells us as much. “The instinct of self-preservation made us anticipate possible dangers and suggested ways of dealing with them.”

This psychological component is what keeps physical action from becoming purely mechanical. For Stanislavski, the actor focuses not on the performance of the action itself, but on the psychological need that brings it about. This need is called a task. In the above example, an actor may wedge a chair into a door to barricade it, but he does not focus on the separate motor functions required to do this. His attention is focused entirely on the task, his need “to barricade the door.”

Tortsov enumerates several requirements for tasks that an actor should choose for his onstage life. More than half of them can be said to address various ways in which tasks might violate the Creative State. Tasks must be “in keeping with the role,” “typical of a role and precisely…related to the meaning of the play,” and they must “correspond to the deeper (as opposed to shallower) meaning of the role.” These three requirements hearken back to the idea of logic and sequence – that the mimetic world must be internally consistent to avoid Tulving’s “mismatch-detection” that would pull actor and audience alike out of any Absorbed State. Stanislavski admits as much with another requirement. Good tasks are those “in which the actor, his fellow actors and the audience can believe.”

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87 Stanislavski and Benedetti 47.
89 Stanislavski and Benedetti 145.
The first prerequisite for a useful task echoes the light metaphor used in the *Circle of Attention* that in turn echoes Baars. To be useful, tasks must “exist on our side of the footlights and not on the other…related to the play, directed towards the other actors, and not to the audience in the front row.” This provides a clear analogical connection to the cognitive phenomenon of Attention. A useful task is one that can occupy the *Circle* (or Spotlight) of *Attention* without violating the *Creative State*.

Tasks are often specific to the moment at hand – the ever-present, ever-changing “now” of theatrical life. Stanislavski required this level of detail, but also demanded that actors see their character, and the play, as a unified whole. He described tasks as working within multiple units of time, or “bits.” Bits could vary in size, from the instant of performance to the span of larger events. The task, once attended to, becomes action when it takes over the body (more on this in the following chapter). Momentary tasks can be encompassed by slightly larger tasks – “Barricade the door,” “look for an escape route,” and “find a weapon” can be collectively recalled by the actor in a larger task, “prepare for the attacker.”

These bits can get larger and larger, until the actor can develop a task that encompasses the entire play. Stanislavski called this the *supertask*. The supertask is a singular need that drives the character from beginning to end, and forms the basis for logical choices throughout the play. Tasks at every level of analysis must fit into the supertask. A classic example of this can be seen operating within Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. The actor playing Oedipus may find any number of momentary tasks – “threaten,” “inquire,” “cajole,” and so on. These can be extended out to larger bits that encompass each Episode of the play. He’s “Comforting the old men,” “delving into the mystery of Thebes,” “questioning Tiresias,” and so on. These all seem to fit

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90 Stanislavski and Benedetti 145.
into a single *task*, that of “solving the mystery.” This cannot quite be his *supertask*, however. We see Oedipus act after the killer has been found. If his unifying goal was merely to find the guilty party, he would not go on and blind himself; nor would he exile himself. This can only be explained if we broaden his *supertask* slightly. Throughout the play, Oedipus seeks to “restore prosperity to Thebes.” This explain his actions as king, detective, and exile. His immediate needs have drastically changed, but his actions still betray that singular *supertask*. The actor can, at any given time, let that singular *supertask* come into his consciousness, and he can continue his life without violating the *Creative State*.

The Stanislavskian *supertask* is a mimetic version of something Baars identifies in all of us. On Figure 1. (p. 29), he places our long term goals as one of the context operators that give the present meaning and help determine what we do each moment. To create this long-term goal for the mimetic context is a logical step. *Tasks*, the immediate need to act on the world, can also be found in Baars’s work. The conscious decision to act features prominently in Chapter 3, as we discover how the will to act, or Volition, becomes embodied action.

This leaves us with four primary elements of the Stanislavski System that can occupy the *Circle of Attention*, and gives the actor a number of tools to continue the action of the play without leaving the *Creative State*. An actor’s attention may swing in fractions of a second from *Subtext* to *Imagery* to *Task* to *Supertask*, and continue to change throughout the action of the play. No moment need be empty or entirely passive; the actor can constantly create action out of all these things.

These four elements don’t represent the whole of consciousness in acting. They represent the major elements that an actor can consciously craft in order to shape experience. Sensory stimuli occupy an equal place in the art of “experiencing.” The actor could be conscious of a
door, then his mental image of an *if* for the door, followed by a *task* (“find out who’s behind the door”), followed by the experience of the action required to fulfill that *task* (the tactile experience of turning the knob, then pulling the door open), followed by the visual experience of what is beyond.\(^91\) This chain could continue ad infinitum within the *Creative State*, creating a “stream of consciousness” that is as true for the actor as the character.\(^92\)

**Applications and Additions**

This reading of Stanislavski can already be seen to some degree in the work of contemporary actor-trainers and theorists. Rhonda Blair, one of the current leaders studying the intersection of cognition and acting, proposes a rehearsal and performance technique that is a little more than kin to what I propose here. In her book *The Actor, Image and Action*, she suggests that actors carefully analyze every moment of a script, and develop their connection to the material by looking for specific ties to every moment of the script. In true Stanislavskian fashion, she calls these “images,” but assigns them to any of the inner senses: “visual, aural, experiential, etc.”\(^93\) These images are compiled into a detailed and precise “actor’s score,” which gives the actor detailed preparatory *subtext* on which to found a performance. The actor can be conscious of this score within the *Creative State*.

Blair’s conception of “image” expands on Stanislavski, but does so in a way consonant with Baars. All of the thoughts and recollections she includes as images would serve as the same sort of Actor in Baars’s model. Her own demonstration of an “actor’s score” requires that the performer engage all manner of inner and outer senses. Her *Hamlet* must specifically determine and experience clear images of the time of day, current weather conditions, how long it has been

\(^{91}\) Mechanical control of the body – the intermediate steps between a task and the experience of action – is specifically removed from consciousness, and will be dealt with in the next chapter.

\(^{92}\) Baars 125.

\(^{93}\) Blair 91.
since Hamlet ate, the feel of the words as they inhabit the mouth, or possible subtexts to
Shakespeare’s words. The score isn’t didactic or merely academic. It’s expressed in terms of
tasks: Say/enter/ contemplate/etc. Blair seats the ideal preparation for an actor precisely within
the Stanislavskian borders I have proposed, with few exceptions.94

A notable addition to her conception of images that does not appear in Stanislavski is the
experience of language. She wants actors to experience language as an embodied phenomenon,
both in meaning and production. Actors must experience the feel of words as they exit the
mouth, rather than think ahead to the next word. Each word of the script must call up a new and
immediate image. She includes a focus on the author’s text itself that is conspicuously absent in
An Actor’s Work. This distinct ability to treat text as an embodied phenomenon instead of a
technical recollection and recitation, is key to incorporating the author’s text into this model for
the system. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this distinction between recollection and speech a
crucial one.

At first glance, Blair’s score might seem to replace the received stimuli of every stage
moment. An actor’s attention might be so distracted by the score that there is simply no capacity
left for immediate stimuli. She proposes, however, that an carefully detailed score functions as a
way to open up the present. An actor prepares this score during rehearsal and preparation, but
allows it to change with the lived experience of the mimetic world. She believes that a major
foundation to her proposed technique “is the paradox that the more thoroughly automatic or

94 Blair includes a certain amount of attention paid to the audience, which would not fit within the strict formulation
of the Creative State I propose. It would likely, within the structure I propose, reflect a short exit from absorption,
followed by a return to it. This difference, in and of itself, could be worthy of further study.
patterned a performance is…the freer the actor is to respond spontaneously, in intuitive and creative terms, in the moment."

This seeming paradox – the way intensive preparation can open, rather than replace, the immediacy of the stage environment – is no more a paradox than Diderot’s. The following chapter explores how processes can move back and forth from consciousness to the unconscious mind, and how the Stanislavski System can use this ability, and even require it.

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95 Blair 84.
Chapter 3

The Audience: The Vast Contents of the Unconscious

Thus far, this study has focused on two parts of Bernard Baars’s theater model. The stage, where the activity of the entire theater is focused, and the backstage, where the contents of the stage are given meaning. If we picture this metaphorical model in literal space, an undeniable fact reveals itself. In most any theater, the number of people involved both onstage and backstage make up only a small percentage of the population of the room. The majority (sometimes a vast majority) of the people involved in any act of theater constitute the audience. The audience must be present for it to become an act of theater, and the audience must be changed in some way for that act to be successful. The audience must affect the very performance that affects them. In cognition, this selfsame audience is the cognitive unconscious. This chapter explores the connection between consciousness and unconsciousness, and examines how the System can be said to take advantage of unconscious cognition.

Volition: How Consciousness Accesses the Unconscious

Our Working Memory is small, according to Baars. It can hold perhaps four images, or seven numbers. Working memory is far from the limit of our knowledge or ability. Cognitive theorists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state, “It is the rule of thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought – and that may be a serious underestimate.” Our unconscious mind holds vast stores of information: recollections, skills, beliefs, ideas and so on. We access these stores constantly in our lives, often without ever

96 Baars 41.
becoming conscious of that access. One concept from Baars that puts this access into perspective is “Volition.” As usual, he credits William James with his baseline definition. Volition (or Will, as James also called it) is the ability to consciously engage with the world – to decide to act upon it. James’s example is one that remains familiar to us all. He describes his own dilemma when forced to get out of bed on a cold morning. The conscious mind knows it must get up, yet the muscles seem to refuse. Conscious goals compete with unconscious drives. This all-too-familiar example illustrates that a conscious desire is not, in and of itself, enough to realize action. The unconscious must be recruited.

The volitional act- the decision to act - is a conscious one, but it illuminates the function of the unconscious. Volition is the first conscious component of any action. In fact, it is, according to Baars, one of the limited conscious components of an action. He maintains that the vast majority of the processes involved in producing action are unconscious. The only possible conscious elements are as follows:

“a. the ‘idea’ or goal (really just an image or idea of the outcome of the action);
b. perhaps some competing goal;
c. the ‘fiat’ (the ‘go signal’, which might simply be release of the inhibitory resistance to the goal); and finally,
d. sensory feedback from the action.”

The echoes of Stanislavski in this passage are unmistakable. The task is a need to act; a need to change some aspect of the world outside the actor. Tasks can be multilayered and even contradictory, with prioritization decided by higher level processes such as the Supertask. The actor is free to act once he drops inhibition; hence the need for belief and muscular release.

98 Baars 133.
Finally, the actor’s attention must always be available to sensory information in the art of “experiencing.” Baars’s steps of conscious action fit neatly in with Stanislavski’s. To follow his thinking further, we must investigate the multitude of things that happen between each step in that string of conscious acts. The need to act is conscious; the fulfillment of that need is almost entirely unconscious.

A hypothetical example: As I walk across a stage, the light board operator tests the lighting equipment. A bright light suddenly shines in my eyes. The surfeit of light overwhelms my ability to process it, which I experience as discomfort. With only the barest of conscious deliberation, I decide to shield my eyes with my hands. That decision to act in response to a stimulus is a conscious and volitional act. That decision brings to bear a number of unconscious processes. As I raise my hand, dozens of muscles must work in concert to bring my hand up to a fairly precise position. Moving my hand requires the rest of my body to rebalance itself, which involves additional muscles. All of the cognition that governs the use of these muscles is unconscious. At no point in this action do I become conscious of the myriad commands given these muscles. Instead, I become aware that my hand has moved, and of any sensory information I take in during that movement. I might feel a breeze created as my hand moves air out of its way, or I might sense increased temperature on my palm as it blocks the radiant heat from the light source. The vast majority of commands that my brain has given my body have sprung from the unconscious mind. Most of these actions were not done consciously, but were set in motion by a very conscious desire.

Skill Memory: the Cognitive Unconscious and the Body

The way in which we perform these actions is usually not a priori knowledge. From our infancy, we develop the mental skills needed to coordinate different muscle groups into
harmonious action. We learn specialized motor skills throughout our lives, whether it be skipping, juggling, typing, or the shifting of the gears of a car’s manual transmission. We develop these skills through repetition, until the steps needed to complete them leave our Working Memory and are implanted instead in what Baars calls “Skill Memory.” We retain a memory of each finger movement required to type, yet we rarely have to think about it. Our brain desires a specific letter, and the unconscious memory of the muscular movement required to carry it out is engaged.

While “Skill Memory” refers primarily to physical skills, the concept can be broadly applied. All sorts of memory systems are placed in the “Audience” of the cognitive unconscious, and many function in similar ways. Among these, Baars includes: semantic networks, autobiographical and declarative memory, beliefs, knowledge of the world, details of language, reading, recognition of stimuli, self-knowledge. Any of the thousands of processes we use on a daily basis without thinking of them reside within this “Audience.” We retrieve knowledge from these vast unconscious stores, usually without any consciousness of the workings of that recall.

Advances in brain imaging provide striking proof of the existence of Skill Memory within the cognitive unconscious. Baars provides a color insert at the beginning of In the Theater of Consciousness that is startling. He shows a pair of images from a Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scan that were taken four weeks apart, while the same subject performed the same task. In both instances, the subject was playing the computer game Tetris. The first image shows the subject learning to play the game. The brain is lit up brightly in multiple areas, indicating significant neural activity of many types. After four weeks of practice, the brain of the same subject demonstrates a remarkable drop-off in neural activity. Multiple brain centers still activate, but the size of the regions activated are an order of magnitude smaller, and most of the
activity that still does exist is virtually halved in intensity. The writers of the original study concluded that the subjects’ increase in skill (average game scores improved more than sevenfold among the subjects) potentially indicated greater efficiency in neural processing.

According to Baars, “one reasonable interpretation” of these data is to assume that the skills needed to play this complex game have become “habitual and nearly unconscious.” This is a small leap from the study itself, but it adequately explains its findings within Baars’s model. If skills become entirely unconscious, they are stripped of all competing information. Tetris players no longer consciously debate the relative merits of various button presses; instead, they need only focus on the visual information from the screen. Information comes in, and the various learned skills within the unconscious produce the one appropriate outcome based on past experience and practice.

His use of the word “habit” is no accident; it hearkens back to William James, who described skill acquisition in a way not dissimilar from Haier, et al. “Habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes fatigue.” James believes that novel physical action - action performed without benefit of habit or training – is inherently inefficient, as conscious effort multiplies the nerve impulses (as James thought of any physical action) that the brain sends out. A human is “born with tendency to do more things than he has ready-made arrangement for in his nerve-centers.” James is thinking in cognitive terms, but his assumption is backed up by the 1992 study that used a biochemical methodology.

99 Baars Insert 1. Baars’s usage of “nearly unconscious” is problematic; one can only assume it is a reference to the multitude of component processes involved in the game, and that a small number of these processes continue to occupy consciousness.
100 James I.112. (emphasis in original)
101 James I.113.
James tied this increase in efficiency to a decrease in conscious effort. He noted that turning a novel action into a habitual one “diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed.”\footnote{James I.114.} This diminishment of attention meant, in James’s Cartesian view, a diminishment of the role of the brain in habitual activities. Habitual movements virtually left the brain behind, and were instead controlled almost entirely by the nervous system – the body itself.

As a proof of this, James describes how habitual movements in humans can be learned in much the same way they can be in animals. He relates the story of warhorses that have been known to perform their duties on the battlefield in response to the appropriate signal – even when they carry no rider to make their charge useful or even desired.\footnote{James I.114.} These horses had been trained in this habitual action, and all animals were, to him, pure body – a collection only of instincts and habits that reside within the nervous system. If we follow the Cartesian \textit{cogito} fully, this makes sense – an animal doesn’t question its existence, and therefore (by Descartes’ definition) it has no consciousness. Any skills they learned would have to be unconscious, and either instinctual or habitual.

Baars, in describing humans, modifies James somewhat, and virtually leaves Descartes behind. Instead of habitual memories residing directly in the nervous system (and bypassing the brain), Baars reunites mind and body by stating that these habits reside in areas of the brain not devoted to conscious thought. These areas of the brain have a vast, almost unlimited capacity. Even as he describes different types of memory systems that are stored in the cognitive unconscious, he includes an entry to reveals its scope. Along with Skill Memory and other automatisms, he adds to the list, “thousands more.”\footnote{Baars 42.}
Embodiment: The Actor’s Body and Skill Memory within the System

While we know that Stanislavski was well steeped in the psychology of his time, his training program exhibits a remarkable understanding of habit and Skill Memory. He required his students to learn myriad technical skills, but he recognized that their employment during performance would not be conscious. “The techniques we use to embody unconscious experience do not respond to cold calculation either. They, too, must often embody our minds unconsciously and intuitively.” He didn’t claim to invent this access to the unconscious. “Nature is the best creative artist and technical master of all. She alone has the absolute power to control both the inner and outer apparatus of experiencing and embodiment.” We, as human beings, walk around everyday combining physical skills with emotional and psychological openness; the System seeks a way that actors can do the same.

The scope of these technical skills during Stanislavski’s time are made crystal clear. On the first day of “Year Two” in An Actor’s Work, the students are confronted with a number of banners newly invading their studio. Each is a broad new skill they are about to be accountable for. They are daunted by the list: “‘Singing, ‘placing the voice,’ ‘diction,’ ‘the laws of speech,’ ‘tempo-rhythm,’ ‘expressive movement,’ ‘dance,’ ‘gymnastics,’ ‘fencing,’ ‘acrobatics.’” Stanislavski goes into extraordinary detail on many of these subjects in the books, but implies far greater detail than we are able to read of. Kostya informs the reader on multiple occasions that his studies in gymnastics, dance, and fencing are continuing, even as the main thread of the book continues on other subjects.

105 Stanislavski and Benedetti 352.  
106 Stanislavski and Benedetti 352.  
107 Stanislavski and Benedetti 351.
Stanislavski was as much an arbiter of style as he was an artist, and he had very specific requirements for the external trappings of acting. We read of Tortsov specifically training the bodies of the actors to fit his (and his audience’s) stage ideal. He gives individualized training on walking, speaking, and standing; seemingly rebuilding the actor’s body from scratch.\textsuperscript{108} Stanislavski was so specific in his writing about some of the technical details he required that his newest translator, Jean Benedetti, felt the need to cut entire sections of Stanislavski’s writing from An Actor’s Work that dissected the minutiae of Russian grammar, and the actor’s mastery of it.\textsuperscript{109} This training was intended to make all the possibilities of the actor’s body available for work, just as the basics of psychotechnique made the actor’s mind more available.

“Without outward forms, the character’s particular personality doesn’t get across to the audience,” Tortsov instructs.\textsuperscript{110} He demonstrates a number of small physical changes that can “illuminate, illustrate, and so put across the invisible, inner shape of a character’s mind to the audience.”\textsuperscript{111} These characteristics are not meant to replace psychotechnique, but to complement and illuminate it. After shocking his students with his demonstration, Tortsov asks, “Did you notice…that mentally I was still Tortsov the whole time..?”\textsuperscript{112} He goes on to demonstrate that a solid command of vocal techniques can allow an actor to change the tone and articulation of his voice using pitch variations and tongue placement.\textsuperscript{113}

After this instruction, Tortsov sends the students off to get costumes and makeup, so that they can physically develop a character of their own. Kostya wanders through costume storage almost aimlessly, until he discovers an old coat that calls out to him. He takes it and begins his

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\textsuperscript{108} Stanislavski and Benedetti 372-3.  
\textsuperscript{109} Stanislavski and Benedetti xix.  
\textsuperscript{110} Stanislavski and Benedetti 516.  
\textsuperscript{111} Stanislavski and Benedetti 516.  
\textsuperscript{112} Stanislavski and Benedetti 517.  
\textsuperscript{113} Stanislavski and Benedetti 517-519.
work, but he is confused. He cannot bring to the surface this character suggested to him by the coat. He laments, “my conscious mind was in a fog, I couldn’t see ahead, I was split in two.” His consciousness is quite literally divorced from the impulses of his unconscious. Through a series of flashes of insight, Kostya adds makeup and props until he has created an entire character – a grotesque critic. In performing the character, he finds very quickly that he notices these physical characteristics he adds in performance, but does not consciously manipulate them. He responds to the improvised scene at hand (a comic confrontation with Tortsov himself) as if he is the critic, and his body, voice, and mind spring into action without conscious manipulation. He manages to physically act well outside the parameters of his normal everyday activities, with an exaggerated walk, bow, and other gestures. To do so requires a level of physical control that most people do not have, but that is required of actors.

Habit: Training the Cognitive Unconscious

“We must develop our voice and body with nature as a basis,” Tortsov tells his students. To do so “requires a great deal of long, systematic work.” This systematic work was intended not to turn the actor into a mechanism, but to remove physical detriments from the actor. A bad walk or a slouch, apart from distracting the viewer, could create muscular tension, which would preempt the Creative State. A great deal of grueling work was required so that the body would respond to the needs of the task and given circumstances of the moment. Just as in Baars’s description of Volition, the muscles are trained to respond when consciousness calls upon them. Specifically required skills must be built up as habits so that they are available when needed.

114 Stanislavski and Benedetti 521.
115 Stanislavski and Benedetti 523-527.
116 Stanislavski and Benedetti 352.
117 Stanislavski and Benedetti 352.
Some of the skills that reside in our unconscious are instinctive. Before birth, we have the ability to operate our lungs, heart, and other muscles. Our brains produce different waves of signal. These operate throughout our lives without our explicit control. Yet if we stipulate, as Baars does, that we can learn how to consciously manipulate these things, we are forced to accept that the entire boundary between consciousness and the cognitive unconscious may consistently shift. If actions that are normally unconscious can become conscious, it follows that the way to train an unconsciously applied skill could begin with consciousness. We must, to borrow from Stanislavski, find a conscious means to train the unconscious.

Many of the skills we take for granted as automatisms are learned through hours of instruction and practice. A newborn baby concentrates on crawling or walking until it becomes what we, thanks to William James, think of as “Second Nature.” Two things are required, according to William James, in order to develop habit. The first, and by far most important, is repetition. An action must be performed over and over again until the mind trusts that it will proceed without distinct volitional acts for its component parts. James lists and cites numerous examples from life of this phenomenon, but perhaps the most entertaining and illustrative is one he borrows from Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Elementary Lessons in Physiology*: Huxley relates a legend of a recently discharged military veteran who is induced to drop a plateful of food when a joker calls him to attention. Huxley and James agree that the rote training of the veteran’s years of service overrode the present desire for food, and his body responded without any pause for conscious thought. The habit of immediate compliance with the command has become stronger than any competing demand.

\[118\] Whyman 117. Whyman argues that James popularized the term “Second Nature.”
Examples of automatisms, as Baars calls these unconscious actions, aren’t hard to find closer to our own time. Baars cites a 1984 work by cognitive psychologist James Reason that looks at fatal accidents caused purely by automatic behavior. The first example, “a London bus driver who crashed a double-decker bus into a low overpass, killing six passengers,” likely due to the fact that, “he was in the habit of driving the same route in a single-decker bus.”

Repetition not only removes the need for voluntary access, it can even, while one is in an absorbed state, remove the possibility of access. Only when something unexpected (or, in this case, tragic) happens is a person pulled out of that absorbed state and back into consciousness.

James’s “Second Nature” is a powerful part of the “Nature” to which Stanislavski referred. Indeed, the methods that Stanislavski used to teach his students to train their bodies to respond to volitional needs share more than a coincidental relationship to those of William James and his successors. As previously discussed, Rose Whyman has made a compelling case that Stanislavski was familiar with the ideas of William James, possibly through directly reading James’s work. She has evidence that Stanislavski had the writings of James suggested to him by colleagues, and that he was “on close terms” with I. I. Lapshin, who translated James into Russian by 1896. Furthermore, we know with a certainty that he had a number of volumes in his personal library that were directly influenced by James. Stanislavski’s most oft-referenced psychological antecedent, Theodule Ribot, put forth ideas that are virtually impossible in a world without William James.

Whyman’s article, “The Actor’s Second Nature: Stanislavski and William James,” draws significant parallels to parts of the training necessitated by the system, and ideas of habit

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120 Baars 134.
121 Baars 176.
122 Whyman 116-117.
123 A large portion of his home library has been lost. It is therefore plausible, but not proven, that he had Lapshin’s translation of James on his shelves.
elucidated by James. She makes the case that what became the System began for Stanislavski as the pursuit of a set of daily exercises that could prepare the actor’s physical and psychological instrument for rehearsal and performance. An early example of this “actor’s toilette” comes to us from Stanislavski’s assistant, Leopold Sulerzhitsky, who described his mentor’s dream as “the whole troupe doing exercises such as freeing the muscles, going ‘into the circle (of attention)’ for half an hour before rehearsal.” Stanislavski likened these exercises to the vocal exercises that a singer does every day. Stanislavski continued to develop exercises that were meant to produce readiness in the actor’s body and mind. When he needed a name for these exercises, it was only natural that he employ a concept much in vogue in Russia at the time – a “system.” Whyman argues that the name “System” was likely chosen for its resonance with the Industrial Revolution going on around him. Other artists, such as Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and Francois Delsarte, described sets of physical exercises in terms of “systems.” While these other systems borrowed terminology from the assembly line, they did not share the same goal. In an industrial setting, an assembly line exists so that any appropriate input efficiently produces a predictable outcome. These physical artists believed in a kind of efficiency – every dancer must economize his energy when possible – but this efficiency was always intended in service of an ever-changing product.

Stanislavski loved to quote Sergei Volkonsky, who advocated for Dalcroze and Delsarte in Russia, and who collaborated with Stanislavski for a time. What Stanislavski called “Volkonsky’s Aphorism” suggested that, through hard work, “what is difficult becomes habitual, the habitual easy, and the easy beautiful.” The physical demands placed on an actor can be both precise and unforgiving, whether it be the dance steps of a stage musical, the highly choreographed violence of a sword duel, or even innumerable everyday instructions of basic

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124 Whyman 115.
125 Whyman 118.
stage movement that a director might give (Stand here, take two steps upstage, tilt your head up into the light, sit here). These must still be accomplished, but the only way to use them to make art is to first make them habits.

Much of the Stanislavski System in training can be thus viewed as a collection of habits. The actor learns to access a wider range of mental and physical possibilities, and learns to identify and reproduce the specific behaviors that will bring the author’s character out of themselves. If we accept that the *Creative State* requires a certain limitation of attended stimuli, it follows that the System must focus greatly on training the cognitive unconscious to accomplish that which must remain outside of consciousness. To more explicitly see how a modern theorist attempts to do so, we can revisit Rhonda Blair’s “image schemas” that were introduced in Chapter 2.

Unconscious Recollection, Conscious Action: Revisiting Rhonda Blair

In the last chapter, I discussed Rhonda Blair’s experiments with image schemas, and the creation of highly a highly detailed actor’s “score.” This score was composed of sensory images that the actor associates with each performative moment within the text. This provided a useful dividing line for the consciousness of the actor, because it centers on imagery, just as Stanislavski did. We left her scheme behind with unanswered questions, however. Of primary concern to this chapter is the resolution of her statement that “the more thoroughly automatic or patterned a performance is…the freer the actor is to respond spontaneously, in intuitive and creative terms, in the moment.”126 This implies that the patterns that the actor develops in rehearsal enter the *Circle of Attention*, but they do not crowd out other things. Just as with other actions, the result of these images is experienced consciously, but the recollection of these

126 Blair 84.
images is not. If it were, the stream of images necessary to an entire performance would quickly overwhelm Working Memory, and make the processing of any other type of information impossible. Actors must recall these images while accomplishing the beauty that Volkonsky’s aphorism would suggest. To describe how this could work, we need simply examine recollection as a phenomenon, and how it might be specialized in the mind of the actor.

Theories of mind have long subscribed to some version of skill memory, as discussed above. So far, we have primarily dealt with skill memory as a muscular process, which it precisely is. If we look at neighboring processes within the cognitive unconscious, a new possibility become clear. Baars includes any number of memory systems within the cognitive unconscious, including ideas of self, and memories of words. These memory systems are clearly at work within in actor, but the problem of acting demands a slight perceptual shift in talking about memory and recollection.

Baars’s goal is to describe and predict how the mind of a human being will work in everyday life. Our lives are a helter-skelter mix of both the predictable and the surprising, necessitating an attitude on our part that is always prepared for the unexpected. When we are faced with a conversation, we use our memory of language to search for specific words, phrases, inflections, and idioms that will communicate what we desire to the object o our conversation. According to Baars, the processes by which we recall these are unconscious ones. We desire to communicate a specific thought – an inherent task (and volitional act). Unconsciously, we search for the right words, and arrange them into proper sentences, and alter the biological mechanisms of speech in order to add meaning, using tone, inflection, even facial expression.

In the case of a human in everyday life, we unconsciously recall details of language in order to accomplish a task. Given similar tasks with different circumstances, we might choose
different words, or perform those words differently. Actors lack that option. In rehearsal, an
actor might feel free to improvise on necessary language. Stanislavski extensively used
improvisation as both a training and rehearsal technique. In performance, however, an actor
must exhibit exacting technical mastery over the playwright’s words. She must, as Rhonda Blair
puts it, “Treat it like it’s Shakespeare, even if it isn’t.”  

The simplest way to resolve this tension is to imagine a new kind of memory system –
one that is, strictly speaking, outside the purview of In the Theater of Consciousness – that is a
hybrid of lexical and skill memory systems. Simply put – an actor must develop the rote
recitation of words as a habitual and physical skill. Actors must memorize the words of the
author until they can recall them without the action of recollection requiring conscious, attended
thought. Such a hybrid is a leap, but not a large one. Speech is, at its base, a collection of
mechanical processes no different than juggling, driving, or playing Tetris. It easily follows that
an actor can train his body to respond with the mechanical reproduction of those words when
given the appropriate stimulus (usually a cue line from another actor). Thus an actor can be
entirely conscious of the word or phrase he speaks yet remain entirely unconscious of what the
next phrase will be.

This kind of recitation would seem to fit into what Baars would call an automatism, but it
does not reduce the actor to an automaton devoid of volition. Instead, it keeps the Spotlight
focused to resist overcrowding it, and allows the actor to attend to the experience of the words as
they are spoken. Words, when spoken, have a number of sensory components other than simple
denotative meaning; they have pitch, tone, diction, breath, and so on. These sensory components
are examples of what Baars calls Qualia. The actor is freed from turning his attention inward,

127 Blair 52.
and can focus on how the author’s words can accomplish the task presented by the *Given Circumstances*.

If we accept this proposition – that recollection of complex data is possible without consciousness – further conceptual “dominoes” fall into place. If words can be recalled, why not images? Indeed, Stanislavski explicitly instructed students to be cognizant of mental imagery so that it could overlay live visual input. In the case of the cardboard fireplace, that the student Kostya had to see as a brick one, this was made clear. It follows from what we know about the *Creative State* that Kostya must be aware of the image, but not necessarily his recollection of it. The brick fireplace must be carefully crafted and recalled in order to be of use to Kostya, but his recollection of it would violate that essential immediacy that the *Creative State* implies.

If we follow both these phenomena, we accept the proposition that both words and images can be recalled from long-term memory without the involvement of consciousness. Baars tells us that the process of recalling virtually anything from long-term memory is an “utterly opaque” process.¹²⁸ Notably, the example he gives of this is an image – the image of the American flag. We can read the words “American flag,” but we (as yet) lack the ability to describe the process by which that information is stored, indexed, and recalled. We cannot be sure if we simply add information chronologically according to when it is learned, or if images are organized by contextual categories, or if the image of an American Flag requires near-simultaneous recollection and synthesis of concepts for Red, Blue, White, Star, Stripe, Square, Rectangle, America, Revolution, nation, etc. Recollection is, like most other habitual actions, a mostly unconscious process.

¹²⁸ Baars 177.
Therefore, we can take two phenomena that Baars explicitly assigns to the unconscious – image and word recollection, and simply assume that the human mind has the capability to recall specifically memorized words and images in the same way that it can recall the constituent muscular actions needed to perform a physical skill. This specialized memory system that I propose for actors is the final piece necessary to make the System work within Baars’s model. It allows for all of the requirements of the System. An actor can, if we allow for specialized memory systems, train any kind of specific technical behavior required provided that behavior becomes habit. What becomes important to combine technical mastery with the Creative State is that any technical minutiae are trained and rehearsed to a point that the actor no longer need be conscious of them without performing them.

This chapter demonstrates how an association between the conscious and unconscious elements of the Creative State is both possible and suggested by Stanislavski. As with other parts of the System, he built his work on a solid foundational understanding of psychology as it was during his time. The intervening years have, as I have shown throughout this study, strengthened his case more than they have harmed it. Our current understanding of the nature of habit and its role in training the unconscious can likely yield exciting new tools for actors wishing to train in their own form of the System. Rhonda Blair’s work reveals one exciting set of possibilities to this end, and more approaches like hers will likely be developed in the near future.
Conclusion

Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski didn’t seek to redefine an actor’s craft, per se. He wished rather to describe the mechanics of geniuses so as to make their methods more accessible to all actors. He also fought for an overall theater aesthetic that was based on illuminating the human experience. The tenacity and integrity with which he conducted his lifelong study ensured that the System never became more important than the actor’s essential humanity. It should, therefore, be no surprise that the System has held up over time. We can modify our understanding of it, just as we modify our understanding of the human mind. Like William James, Stanislavski still has plenty to teach us a century after he began his work in earnest.

We can embrace both the complexity and the simplicity of the System. Complex, because it can incorporate innumerable skills, stimuli, and situations, whether or not the actor is even aware of them. Simple, because its aims can be stated simply and clearly. In the simplest possible terms, the Stanislavski System can be seen as a method of training actors to enter and maintain a Creative/Absorbed State. To do so, the actor must attend to only those thoughts and stimuli we would be conscious of in (the character’s) life, and must train the unconscious to take care of the rest.

We have no evidence that Stanislavski ever considered his System “finished.” If anything, we have a great deal of evidence to the contrary. All through his life, he experimented and continually sought a deeper understanding of humanity. He added new practices, tested new ideas, and abandoned ideas that didn’t produce helpful results. He might even celebrate the sheer number of teachers who have taken his work and built upon it, now that he cannot continue it himself. A great deal of debate among western (particularly American) acting teachers is
about which one of them is Stanislavski’s torchbearer - who has taken the work of the “Master” in the direction he himself would have.

A flexible description of the System, such as I’ve proffered here, will never help resolve this question; we can never know what Stanislavski would have developed had he been alive these past seven decades. I propose, instead of exploring a sort of apostolic succession, that we look at different heirs to Stanislavski in terms of what parts of the System they are most effective for. We might find, through extensive analysis, that any number of his adherents would have both strengths and weaknesses in their attempt to fulfill the basic definition of Stanislavskian acting I’ve given above. It follows, too, that individual actors might find the exercises and training of one teacher unlocks the Creative State (or whatever their nomenclature for absorption might be) more than any other. This study does not and cannot privilege one over the other, but only offer the possibility of a neutral description of the results of training in the Stanislavski tradition.

To demonstrate how this definition could work, I give three more recent examples from this country. One, Sanford Meisner, was among the first teachers to popularize elements of the System in the United States. Another, Rhonda Blair, is experimenting today in this same tradition. The third, David Mamet, claims to almost completely reject Stanislavski out of hand. A cursory glance at all three reveals kinship with the System as I’ve described it in this study.

This basic definition of acting I’ve given above – The ability to enter and maintain a Creative State - will prove immediately recognizable to any student of the Sanford Meisner Approach. Meisner defined good acting as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.”129 His obsession with “truth” was an obsession with nature; all of the exercises he is best known for

129 Sanford Meisner with Dennis Longwell, Sanford Meisner on Acting (Vintage: New York. 1987) 15.
are purely for the purpose of eliminating conscious thought within the actor in favor of natural reaction and instinct. Meisner demanded that his students react rather than think. His best known exercise – the “repetition” exercise, is slowly built with students over a period of months, as they learn to concentrate less on themselves and more on their acting partner. By the end of the first major segment of his training, students can enter (virtually at will) an entirely present state, with no attention on the past or future. It is, without doubt, another version of Stanislavski’s *Creative State*.

The Meisner Approach has had great success in training the *Creative State* in students, but lacks a solid approach to technical work. The closest it gets is in the workbooks on the Meisner Approach written by Larry Silverberg. In dealing with the memorization of dialogue, Silverberg (who was trained by Meisner) suggests that actors memorize dialogue by rote until they need not consciously think of the next word or line. Meisner doesn’t directly deal with other, more physical skills, but the suggestion to habituate dialogue could easily be expanded to other skills, as I suggest here.

This idea of habituation is also central to the ongoing work of Rhonda Blair, as I’ve demonstrated. Blair rather significantly habituates both technical and imaginative recollection in the mind of the actor. For her, actors can prepare themselves to experience exactly what is necessary to produce a compelling performance, and still not violate the freedom needed for that performance to be born. Blair accepts the *Creative State* on terms similar to both Meisner and Stanislavski by comparing it to the concept of “flow” that many artists and athletes alike report.

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She also demonstrates how the process of inquiry that is Stanislavski’s primary legacy continues today among practitioners and thinkers alike.

Even those who would claim to defy or reject Stanislavski could likely (if grudgingly) find kinship in this description of the system. One prominent and illustrative example of this is playwright David Mamet, who rather famously declared the Stanislavski System and everything derived from it “nonsense”¹³² and “a lot of hogwash.”¹³³ Mamet seems, at first, to agree with Denis Diderot, stating that the actor “is as free of the necessity of ‘feeling’ as the magician is of the necessity of actually summoning supernatural powers.”¹³⁴

A closer look at some of Mamet’s specific complaints is illuminating. One of his major problems is that actors are trained to concentrate on entering specific emotional states, and that any attempt to do so leads to self-consciousness. This self-consciousness will always “take the actor right out of the play.”¹³⁵ Forgiving for a moment Mamet’s crucial misunderstanding of Stanislavski (most of his complaints center around Affective Memory, which Stanislavski abandoned fairly early in his work) we can see that Mamet’s concern is any technique in which the actor’s attention is taken by anything outside of the world of the play. He resists anything which allows actors to enter into an Absorbed State that is irrelevant to the playwright’s words. He even refers to this as “self-absorption.”¹³⁶

Mamet doesn’t seek only to tear down; he offers some simple suggestions in how an actor might proceed. He suggests that actors concentrate almost solely on an “objective,” which

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¹³¹ Blair 51-52.
¹³³ Mamet 12.
¹³⁴ Mamet 13.
¹³⁵ Mamet 11.
¹³⁶ Mamet 95.
the actor should find by asking herself, “What do I want?” in each moment. This “objective” is virtually identical to Stanislavski’s *Task*, and Mamet wants actors to be conscious of it to the exclusion of all other bits of technique. Beyond that, an actor should, to quote James Cagney, “Hit your mark. Look at the other fellow. Say the lines.” He wants to strip acting down to its basics, but acknowledges the help a conscious *task* can be in that process. Mamet, like the other two teachers, seems to have internalized some of the same truths about the human mind & body that Stanislavski did. What is impossible to determine is whether these three did so by studying Stanislavski’s work, growing up in a theater founded on his ideas, or through their own extensive observation and experimentation.

The results of Konstantin Stanislavski’s engagement with the psychology of his day are still highly useful to us today. Far more useful than his specific content, however, is the process of engagement he employed throughout his life. He felt that “art should be on good terms with science.” This study can hopefully demonstrate in some small part that the monumental advances in science over the ensuing decades need not destroy this axiom. As Cognitive Science continues to advance, it will create more and more opportunities for studies like this. Many of the current research methodologies of Cognitive Science prove problematic in studying acting. First of all, most researchers study cognition as it happens in human beings in everyday life, and are still only beginning to construct viable models for how that works. Acting, the intentional subversion and manipulation of that process, adds an undeniable level of complexity to that research. Imaging machines that could be used to measure the brain activity of actors are often constructed in such a way as to preclude an actor’s natural work – the confinement often

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137 Mamet 82.
138 Stanislavski and Benedetti xxiv.
necessary would likely prove a challenge to any Creative/Absorbed State that an actor would attempt to enter.

There is still plenty of work to do in the meantime. Bernard Baars’s In the Theater of Consciousness is over a decade old and represents a starting point for the learner of Cognitive Science. An enormous body of research already exists that theater scholars can tap into, and many impressive scholars are already doing just that. Consciousness – the central locus of Bernard Baars’s work – likely has much more to reveal about the actor’s process. Another area of Cognitive Science in Theater Research that is just beginning is the study of the audience as a collection of thinkers and responders. For every bit of meaning that is created in the actor, another meaning is created in the spectator. A comprehensive examination of a spectator’s point of view, and to what extent that spectator enters an Absorbed State of her own, could yield both impressive and useful results.

Stanislavski thought that art should always begin with nature. As this study has shown, in order to build the actor’s art as he did, he needed to demonstrate an impressive and sophisticated understand of the nature of humanity. This study demonstrates that artistic aims of the System often belie the more empirical means that it employs. A more empirical nomenclature such as this study suggests can be employed to describe multiple acting techniques, and avoid the sectarian disputes and polite divisions that can obscure productive discourse. By coming to an agreement on what an actor’s job is using this more empirical mindset, we can describe different pedagogies not as right or wrong, but as each having strengths and weaknesses in their attempt at the same goal. No one need be the “true” heir of Stanislavski if we can see his process of analysis, research, experimentation, and creation continuing today in a wide array of theorists, teachers, and practitioners.
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