



VIEWPOINTS TRAINING

The Practice That Extends Attention

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Abstract:

In this article, we introduce the principles of the Viewpoints Training method (Bogart; Landau, 2005) in dialogue with the concept of covert attention proposed in cognitive psychology (Findlay, 2003). We suggest that through Soft Focus there is greater engagement of the attention process and focus on peripheral vision during the performance. Other authors are discussed (Spatz, 2015) to amplify analysis on research concerning concepts found in reviews of the literature on Viewpoints (Bogart, 2007, 2014; Climenhaga, 2010; Heald, 1999; Ravid, 2008, 2009).

Keywords

Viewpoints, Dance, Cognition, Soft Focus

What can a body do? Ben Spatz (2015) borrowed the question presented in Gilles Deleuze's reflections on Baruch Spinoza to talk about embodied practice and technical knowledge: as in the martial arts, yoga and the performing arts. To realize his desire to find answers to the question, Spatz organized two international conferences on theatre and performance,¹ in which participants were to answer the question by completing, on a dotted line: "A body can". The responses were diverse: a body can play, warm up, dance the Charleston, answer questions, jump in the air several times, become perfect through imperfection, pulse, time travel, overcome, among other answers (Spatz, 2015).

According to Deleuze (Deleuze, 1990, in Spatz, 2015: 2), "what a body can do" corresponds to the nature and limits of the capacity of the body to be affected, and what the structure of each body allows. Spatz (2015) provokes the question believing that investigations and analysis on the potential of new discoveries in embodied practices have not yet been exhausted: to the contrary, they are far from being answered.

Looking at it from a different perspective, but not far from the issue pointed out by Deleuze and explored by Spatz (2015), we find that in recent decades cognitive psychology and neuroscience have researched how the body structure is affected, and how the body responds to constant new stimuli and develops connections that enable it to acquire skills through experiences. In this sense, researchers have sought to understand "how" a body can do something. Some bodies may become extremely specialized in activities such as dance, martial arts and sports. Ability or skill to do something can be understood as the coordination of the processes of perception, cognition and action that a body can accomplish. It is also associated with accuracy of the actions, of the movements, that lead to further levels of activity and involve a larger variety of mental activities (Wachowicz, 2009).

In recent decades, experimental research has been carried out in laboratories often using brain-imaging techniques such as PET-scan (Positron Emission Tomography), EEG (electroencephalography) and fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to record brain activity while people performed cognitive tasks. There have been studies investigating how non-verbal knowledge transmission processes occur in the brain and which brain regions respond to stimuli perceived and experienced in the body (Wachowicz, 2009). This has changed ways to observe the body and what we have been able to do in/with our bodies.

Following the discussion that Spatz (2015) provoked on "What can a body do?" this article presents part of an interdisciplinary Post Doctoral² research that sought to associate studies of cognitive psychology to dance studies in order to investigate how, and which, Viewpoints training and possible cognitive processes may be intensified during practice. We note that through the practice of Viewpoints the body can extend its attention span, alertness, perception, synchronicity, and even intensify sensory integration. We suggest, that during practice, cognitive processes such as attention, proprioception and awareness can be accentuated, and skills

developed in fast response to external stimuli, as well as adding to the development and cohesion of group work.

In this article we will discuss the proposals of Viewpoints training and body relations in time and space according to Bogart and Landau (2005); along with a dialogue with other discussions on Viewpoints practice (Bogart, 2007; Climenhaga, 2010; Heald, 1999; Ravid, 2008); and, finally, in conjunction with the cognitive process of covert attention involved in training, especially in the use of peripheral vision (Findlay, 2003). Other data and survey results conducted in Post-Doctoral research will be presented at a later date.

The Viewpoints' principles

The theatre directors Anne Bogart and Tina Landau propose Viewpoints training as a philosophy translated into technical training for performers, through a kind of group construction process and the creation of movement for the stage (Bogart & Landau, 2005: 7). However, the authors do not introduce the training as a technique, as such, but suggest that Viewpoints adds interconnected principles and can help actors and dancers to acquire more vivacity, ensemble creativity and aliveness on stage.

The principles of Viewpoints were first set up by the American Marie Overlie, whose work was heavily influenced by artists of the Judson Church Group, including Robert Dunn, Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk and John Cage. In the late '70s, Overlie explored perceptual capacity through her work and created six Viewpoints: space, form, time, emotion, movement, and history (Climenhaga, 2010).

In the early 1980s, Anne Bogart met Mary Overlie at the University of New York and had her first contact with Viewpoints (Heald, 1999). A few years later, Tina Landau was presented to Bogart at the American Repertory Theatre. The two theater directors were inspired to expand from six to nine the Viewpoints created by Overlie (Bogart & Landau, 2005; Climenhaga, 2010; Ravid, 2008). Bogart and Landau (2005) reported that they were enchanted with the idea of Viewpoints because it made it possible to name the actions that they had always performed, and also for the effect, strength and style that the training could provide. It inspired them with the need to renew and re-examine the techniques they had practiced, and reflect on their own observations (Bogart & Landau, 2005).

Years later, the research was published in *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (Bogart & Landau, 2005). The work presents the Viewpoints restructured into nine physical principles, divided respectively into Viewpoints of Time: time, kinesthetic response, duration and repetition; and Viewpoints of Space: topography, form, gesture, spatial relationship and architecture. In addition, the book presents the vocal Viewpoints: pitch dynamic, acceleration/deceleration, silence and timbre. It also presents the concept of Soft Focus as a tool

to keep active attention in peripheral vision during practice. In this way, Viewpoints can be considered a method that adds elements to the development of both dance and theater.

But what makes the Viewpoints so interesting for our research? According to Heald (1999), Viewpoints is a method that offers vocabulary and works the body/mind in a single sphere. The author considers Viewpoints training as the most accurate and complete structure for the development of cognition, because the practice facilitates emotions to be demonstrated physically, as well as the thoughts of the body and reactions to stimuli that occur in the body (Heald, 1999).

At the same time, Climenhaga (2010) suggests that the training requires more consciousness and spatial control than stress or physical strength. In the version organized by Bogart, Viewpoints creates potential for a dynamic basis for training actors. But, although this methodology has aroused great interest and is continually expanding in theater programs and academic degrees in the United States and other countries, training is only one stage of the artist's work (Climenhaga, 2010).

Bogart (2014) suggests three distinct work phases in the construction of the scene: training, composition, and performance. Training is the preparation that will enable the use of space. First of all, accessing freely the Viewpoints facilitates spontaneous choices. Thus, as well as for other proposals for corporal preparation for the scene, it is clear that "the physical exercises are but jumping-off places for an actor's own creativity, for his own exploration of himself and his own experience." (Tom Crawley, quoted in Bogart, 2014: 27). However, this first phase of construction of the work, whether in theater or dance, can lead to amazing improvisations and creating material that will be continue as part of the rehearsals and go to the stage.

Since improvisations are made through the open Viewpoints, scenes begin to be produced in a collaborative way and actors and dancers are much more responsible for the creation than the director or the choreographer. People who are improvising let the movements simply happen, actions succeed actions, movements and displacements emerge, and scenes are being created in duos, trios or even with the whole group. Sometimes it does not seem an improvisation, but a well-rehearsed scene. The work focuses on each person being aware of the multiple stimuli that occur during the group improvisation; experiencing the connections that are created with others; and learning how to create such connections. Climenhaga (2010) suggests that "things happen" in the training, and they are unpredictable, but "you need to let things happen, see them happening, and then respond simultaneously" (Climenhaga, 2010: 296).

Thus, the literature on Viewpoints indicates that the practice of Viewpoints training develops ways to quickly respond to external stimuli; highlights the attention and awareness of self and connection to others; enhances the feeling of aliveness and presence on stage; creates a dynamic group; and extends the sense of "listening with the whole body" (Bogart; Landau, 2005; Climenhaga, 2010; Heald, 1999; Ravid, 2008,2009).

The training increases awareness of cognitive processes as attention and perception, and creativity is developed through cognitive stimuli in a very timely manner. These are some of the corporal qualities that Viewpoints training produces and what makes them so exciting to our research.

The Soft Focus and The Peripheral Vision

One type of multivalent engagement occurs in the Viewpoints training when the artist comes into contact with the others and the space around him, lending a heightened sense of aliveness on stage (Climenhaga, 2010). The philosopher Alva Noë (2009) suggests that the perception happens throughout the whole body, and that attention, perception and consciousness are engaged and flow according to the level of skill competencies. Theories of embodied cognition indicate that during the perceptual experience, associative areas of the brain are activated and connected (Barsalou, 1999).

Spatz (2015) asserts that new ways of thinking about the body as structure, discipline, creativity, vocation and identity can arise through embodied practices such as dance, yoga, martial arts, and sports. Therefore, skills acquisition, achieving “know-how,” knowledge and understanding of what our bodies can do in the world reveal the extension of our consciousness (Noe, 2012).

Over the past decades, new and more complex approaches of understanding the body have emerged, the rational viewpoint and the explicit knowledge giving way to more open and complex explorations:

(...) a more complex account of knowledge as ‘situated’ (Haraway, 1988) and largely ‘tacit’ (Polanyi, 2009) along with a concomitant analysis of thought and cognition as ‘embodied’ (Lakoff; Johnson, 1999) ‘enactive’ (Varela et al, 1991) and dependent upon – rather than distinct from - emotion (Damasio, 1994) (Spatz, 2015: 24).

Viewpoints training requires a strong collaboration between the artists during the practice. To develop skills and expand the collaborative process actors and dancers must be attentive to what happens around them. The attention and awareness to external stimuli can lead artists to have faster bodily responses, and therefore better collaboration in performance (Bogart; Landau, 2005; Climenhaga, 2010; Heald, 1999; Ravid, 2008, 2009).

Attention is a skill that Bogart refers to very often in her books. For the author, concentration and awareness regarding the movements that are being performed during the training are extremely important. Bogart (2007) thinks that attention is related to a state of vigilance or observation. In addition, it is an activity that requires interest and involvement in something that is outside. “Attention is about going beyond self-interest, but at the same time remaining intensely in tune and responsive from within” (Bogart, 2007: 54).

Bogart believes that perception begins in the need of the body to receive new information that is in the world. Overlie calls this process “the news of a difference” (Bogart, 2007: 114). In accordance to the attitude assumed, attention can be turned out into the immediate space surrounding the body of the artist, who, in turn, sends back the stimulus as fresh and precious information. This process is not static: to the contrary, it is moving, active and responsive. A certain attitude can emanate energy out of the body, which is altered and at the same time alters everything it encounters (Bogart 2007). We can then say that perception captures the stimulus by sensory pathways; attention helps us to focus on an object; and the attitude demonstrates the meaning of the proposal in terms of responding positively or negatively to people, objects, or situations.

To explain and identify the process of perception and stimuli flow, Bogart borrows from cybernetics the terms “feedback” and “feedforward,” used to refer to the communication networks of the nervous system and the brain. “Feedforward is the influence of a system on an environment, and feedback is an environment’s influence on the system” (Bogart, 2007: 94). For the author, when attitudes are used with spontaneity, the artist is constantly balancing these two forces, which have opposite directions and encounter each other in the stage-audience relationship as a two-way street in which attention, tension and attitude transit. She also suggests that the key skill of a great actor is to know how to balance and to keep balanced such processes (Bogart, 2007). The attitude of the artist in performance determines the amount of energy that is put out, and this does not just happen simply by the power of the artist’s effort, but also occurs by the transformative experience that follows the intense exchange of energies in the feedback and feedforward process (Bogart, 2007: 95).

It is essential to indicate here the importance of the communication pathway generated by the attitude through the attention and awareness of the stimuli that surround the body in performance. Bogart (2007) concludes that, in performance, the artist, and here we speak of both actors and dancers, may seem narcissistic or lethargic with slight feedforward and too much feedback. Effective communication occurs when the artist extends out and, at the same time, allows him/herself to receive external impressions and be changed by them (Bogart, 2007). Ravid (2009) argues that while this discussion is not new, the observations and insights pointed out by Bogart lead to a reflection on how to recognize these elements in life and on stage and how to apply them in the creative process.

We think Soft Focus to be the key element in this dialogue between perception and stimulation. Soft focus is the physical condition in which the eyes are relaxed, without focusing or staring at somebody or something. But, once opened to peripheral vision it allows all surrounding objects to be observed (Bogart & Landau, 2005).

Thus, Soft Focus has the function to highlight attention given to peripheral vision. Through awareness in peripheral vision Soft Focus extends the field of view, includes more things and people in the visual field, and maintains information on the surrounding space and movement of others (Bogart & Landau, 2005; Ravid, 2008). “Everyone should use soft focus to develop group consciousness and the space around” (Bogart & Landau, 2005: 29).

In addition, peripheral vision helps to maintain control in an erect posture and corporal balance (Berencsi; Ishihara; Imanaka, 2005; Dearing; Harris, 2011; Dickinson, Leonard, 1967), as well as perceptual orientation (Dearing; Harris 2011; Patla, 1998). It is also critical to the ability to exercise covert attention (Findlay, 2003), and the ability to track multiple objects moving simultaneously in space (Cass; Van Den Burg, 2014). The central and peripheral visions interact in a complex way, but the peripheral visual field does not alter the orientation perceived by the central field (Dearing; Harris, 2011).

It is suggested that Soft Focus enhances the cognitive ability of covert attention. According to Findlay (2003), covert attention is a process that happens when we set eyes forward without moving them while paying attention to the peripheral visual field, i.e., without moving the eyes in a saccade movement, which is the rapid eye movement between fixation points from side to side or up and down.

Broadening the focus of central vision to peripheral perspective gives more attention to the surrounding environment. And this contributes to actors and dancers responding faster and consciously to a stimulus rather than acting on instinct or intuition (Bogart & Landau, 2005).

At the same time, the training seeks that students learn to “listen to the whole body” (Bogart & Landau, 2005). In this way, the dancers and actors are invited to not rely exclusively on visual sources to perform tasks, but to explore all the other senses, including proprioception. Thus, participants become aware and conscious not only visually to what is around them, but also aware of the other senses such as hearing, touch and proprioception.

Perception involves the interpretation of sensory information, giving it understanding and organization. There is no clear distinction between perception and sensation, as its functions seem to be correlative (Noe, 2012; Wachowicz, 2009). The understanding of the underlying brain processes that have emerged from cognitive science research is revolutionizing the understanding of ourselves, our perceptions, emotions and consciousness. And this contributes greatly to our understanding of creative activity, self-knowledge, artistic collaboration and perception of the public. Attention is a cognitive process strongly related to Viewpoints, in which the tension created between two people or things is a crucial and sensitive line that holds the attention of the public and can produce a larger presence of the artist in performance (Bogart, 2014).

What can the body do? In Viewpoints training, a body can learn about cognition, notice surrounding changes, learn different ways of looking at the world; we can adapt to changed conditions in seconds, memorize movements, expand our central and peripheral attention, and this expands the understanding of our own body.

Interdisciplinary research may be useful to observe the need to broaden the basis of dance studies. The knowledge derived from cognitive psychology and neuroscience can offer new insights and new ways of knowledge and perception regarding the body that performs on stage.

We believe that the concepts suggested in this research can help the exploration and sensory investigation proposed by Viewpoints training. Research on the impact of Viewpoints on dance performance is far from being exhausted. We will continue exploring training and improvisations with open Viewpoints, reporting future results and new creative compositions processes.

Endnotes

- 1 The 19th Performance Studies International Conference held at Stanford University (Mahmoud 2014); and another held for an undergraduate course on New Performance, conducted at the College of Staten Island, in NYC (2014).
- 2 The Post Doctoral Research was done at Western Sydney University, The Marcs Institute, Australia (08/2014 - 07/2015), under the CAPES Scholarship (Superior Level Personnel Training Coordination), number 16011-48.

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Biography

Fátima Wachowicz is a dancer, actress, researcher and teacher. She was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The MARCS Institute, Western Sydney University, Australia (2014-2015), on a CAPES Foundation fellowship (Ministry of Education, Brazil), where she developed experimental research and used methods arising from cognitive psychology to investigate the cognitive processes that work intensively during Viewpoints training. She completed her PhD in Performing Arts at the Federal University of Bahia/Brazil (2009). She has been working with both Contact Improvisation and Viewpoints Training as a useful tool to develop improvisation with dancers and actors, and is currently a Professor at the Federal University of Bahia/Brazil, and leads the LAPECOM – (Laboratório de Pesquisa e Estudos Cognitivos do Movimento / Research on the Cognition of Movement Lab. (<http://lapecom.wix.com/lapecom>))

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