

Theatre's Affective Thinking and Creative Human Development: Insights from Philosophy, Science and Art

Drawing upon personal experience as academic researcher in science-art-philosophy and professional theatre director and dramaturg, this article seeks to explore how insights from philosophy, ethology, neuroscience and contemporary theatre practice may contribute towards an interdisciplinary understanding of artistic creation. Philosophers have often discussed the possible roots of artistic creation, such as when Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson associated creativity with affects and ethics. More recently, we witness a renewed interest in what drives creative processes in art by researchers from other fields: namely by ethologist Ellen Dissanayake, who argues that all creative acts are behavior forms of “making special;” and by neuroscientist António Damásio, who states that all artistic creation is motivated by emotions and feelings, and thus crucially cooperates with homeostasis. Among the arts, I suggest that theatre plays a key role in creative human development, because it is a highly collective activity that works with different expressions—physical, verbal, visual, spatial, sonic and musical, among others—to cultivate psychomotor, cognitive-emotional and social skills. Further, theatre practice strengthens emotional thinking, an interface between emotion and cognition that not only allows thoughts to trigger emotions that are played out in the mind-body, but also, in reverse, allows sensory feelings to influence thoughts. Accordingly, this article probes into contemporary rehearsal and production processes in the theatre in order to explore the cognitive-emotional features of artistic creativity in practice, through their relation to the scientific and philosophical understandings of creative acts identified above. The aim is to help expand the research field of art theory and practice, so that it can draw from, and collaborate with, scientific expertise and philosophical knowledge, and hence contribute towards a creative and restorative human development.

Keywords: emotion and affect theory; creative intuition; ethics; theatre theory and practice; interdisciplinary knowledge.

Among the arts, theatre stands out as a highly collective activity that works with different expressions—physical, verbal, visual, spatial, sonic and musical—to cultivate psychomotor, cognitive-emotional and social skills. As in all art forms, affects, emotions and feelings play a central part in theatre creativity. Nevertheless—and although intuition, motivation and imagination are often highlighted, to the detriment of intellectual knowledge, by most theatre practitioners in their creative processes—such cognitive-emotional sources of creativeness are seldom examined or cultivated in academic contexts, perhaps because they are considered a mysterious and inexplicable component of creativity that supposedly cannot be researched nor taught.

This article proposes to explore neuroscientific, ethological and philosophical perspectives on key affective principles of theatre and performance creativity. Philosophers have often discussed the possible roots of artistic creation, such as when Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941) associated affects and creativity with ethics. More recently, we

witness a renewed interest in what drives creative processes in art by researchers from other scientific fields: namely by ethologist Ellen Dissanayake, who argues that all creative acts are play behavior forms of “making special” distinctive of human nature; and by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who claims that all artistic creation is motivated by emotions and feelings and actively cooperates with homeostasis, thus contributing towards the flourishing of humanity’s wellbeing. Drawing on these key thinkers to examine how their concepts may be articulated in performance theory and practice, I argue that theatre both as activity and art not only strengthens affective thinking, but also plays a vital role in creative human development.

In suggesting that theatre strengthens affective thinking I am drawing on the concept of emotional thought defined by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Damasio as that of a functional interface between emotion and cognition that allows thoughts to trigger emotions, which play out in the mind and on the body; and, in a reverse direction, prompting body sensations to generate emotions and feelings that influence thoughts.¹ Emotional thought represents the influence of the mind on the body, and that of the body on the mind, and therefore consists of an essential platform for learning, decision-making and creativity. Affective thinking, however, is broader than emotional thought in that it draws not only upon emotions and feelings but also upon affects. Nonetheless, I will start by approaching the significance of emotions and feelings in theatre creation, and thereafter proceed to explore and clarify the wider implication of affects.

By delving on an emotionally based creativity, I am not implying that theatrical inventiveness resists rational knowledge or intellectual objectivity. In effect, as neuroscience has confirmed in the last decades, such opposition between emotion and cognition is no longer scientifically sustained. Nonetheless, I feel the need to reinstate the importance of affects due to the ongoing neglect of feelings in our culture. As Damasio claims, not only does a well-deployed emotion stand as “a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly,”² but up until the twentieth-first century “feelings have not been given the credit they deserve as motives, monitors, and negotiators of [all] human cultural endeavors.”³ A neglect of feelings in our culture corresponds to a profound disregard towards life itself. My purpose is therefore to emphasize the cognitive-emotional features of creativity, and explore ways in which insights from philosophy, ethology and neuroscience can contribute towards interdisciplinary studies on contemporary theatre theory and practice.

¹ Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Antonio Damasio “We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education.” *Mind, Brain and Education*, 1.1 (March 2007), 8.

² Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999, 42.

³ Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feelings and the Making of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 2018, 3.

Emotions and Feelings as Instigators of Creativity

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has substantially focused his research on the study of emotions and feelings, namely investigating their role in decision-making (*Descartes' Error*, 1994), in the construction of the self (*The Feeling of What Happens*, 1999), and on how they reveal the state and flow of life within an entire organism (*Looking for Spinoza*, 2003). Most significantly, in *A Strange Order of Things* (2018), Damasio claims that emotions and feelings motivate all creations of human culture, by cooperating with *homeostasis*. They account for the human ability to create artworks, to philosophically invent concepts, and to scientifically explain and discover functions.

Given the ubiquity of emotions and feelings in human beings' daily lives, it is quite astounding to observe how neither the public nor science have yet come to grips with what feelings are, how they work, and what they mean. Consequently, Damasio proposes to elucidate the neurobiology of feelings and emotions in his many works, so as to contribute to our views of the brain-mind-body problem, "a problem central to the understanding of who we are."¹

Similarly to other researchers of emotion before him, Damasio differentiates between emotions and feelings:

Emotions are complex, largely automated programs of actions concocted by evolution. The actions are complemented by a cognitive program that includes certain ideas and modes of cognition, but the world of emotions is largely one of actions carried out in our bodies, from facial expressions and postures to changes in viscera and internal milieu. (...) Feelings of emotions, on the other hand, are composite perceptions of what happens in our body and mind when we are emoting. As far as the body is concerned, feelings are images of actions rather than actions themselves; the world of feelings is one of perceptions executed in brain maps.²

Emotions are complex reactions of the body to certain stimuli that happen automatically and unconsciously; they are biologically determined processes influenced by one's own culture and education, but also constructed during a long evolutionary history. When we are afraid of something, for example, our hearts begin to race, our mouths become dry, and our muscles contract. Feelings occur after we become aware of such physical changes; they are fashioned by brain maps and images that each one of us produces based on objects/events that occur both outside and inside our own organism.

Feelings are "mental experiences of body states" and qualify natural vital processes as conducive (or not) to our improvement and wellbeing.³ A distinctive feature of our brain is its ability to create maps and images of its

¹Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, London: William Heinemann, 2003, 7.

²Damasio, *Self comes to mind: Constructing the conscious brain*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012, 116-117.

³Damasio, *Strange Order of Things*, 26.

1 mental experiences. Consequently, feelings can be purely simulated by brain
 2 maps and images, such as when we recreate the other's sorrow or joy and
 3 thereby feel empathy for that person, or as when we attempt to personify a
 4 realistic-type character in the theatre. In sum, "the term feeling should be
 5 reserved for the private, mental experience of an emotion, while the term
 6 emotion should be used to designate the collection of responses, many of
 7 which are publicly observable."¹

8 Theatre directors similarly explore and differentiate among emotions and
 9 feelings in their theories and practices. Underlining the individual and
 10 subjective facet of feelings, Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky
 11 (1863-1938) sought an empathetic relationship of actor-character-spectator
 12 through various techniques described in his books, such as *Affective Memory*,
 13 *Character Development*, *The Given Circumstances*, and *the Magic If*.
 14 Countering naturalist performances, well-made drama, "culinary" theatre and
 15 total theatre (the latter inspired by Romantic composer director Richard
 16 Wagner's staging of immersive and totalizing emotional ambiances to involve
 17 the spectator's senses in his musical dramas), the Epic theatre of Erwin
 18 Piscator (1893-1966) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) warned against emotive
 19 stimulation/manipulation, and sought to elevate the spectators' rational
 20 objective perspective over their subjective emotional response. According to
 21 recent neural research, such binary distinction between emotion and reason
 22 may no longer hold. As cognitive researcher and theatre critic Bruce
 23 McConachie explains,

24 Cognitive neuroscientists and psychologists now affirm that emotional
 25 drives undergird and sustain even the simplest of intellectual tasks. (...) the
 26 Brechtian desire to elevate a spectator's rational over her or his emotional
 27 response was misplaced; a modest level of emotional engagement is
 28 necessary to sustain all rational attention in the playhouse.²

30 Indeed, "the neural anatomy essential for full rationality—the prefrontal
 31 cortex—is a very recent evolutionary innovation, emerging only in the last (...)
 32 2.5 percent of humanity's total time on earth."³ Human rational cognition,
 33 therefore, necessarily rests on a preexisting emotional foundation. As Damasio
 34 points out, a conventional contrast between emotions and reason "comes from
 35 a narrow conception of emotions and feelings as largely negative and capable
 36 of undermining facts and reasoning," when "in reality, emotions and feelings
 37 come in multiple flavors, and only a few are disruptive."⁴

38 More recently, British director Katie Mitchell started working with
 39 emotions in theatre rehearsals by recreating their physical shape or

¹Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 42.

² Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences*, 2008, 3. "The tension between the intellect and emotions is a dichotomy usually assumed by modern theories of acting but no longer supported by cognitive science" (13).

³ Doug Massey, "A Brief History of Human Society: The Origin and Role of Emotion in the Social Life." *American Sociological Review* 67.1 (2002), 15.

⁴ Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things*, 101.

circumstances, making it no longer essential for the actors to subjectively feel the emotions (as in Stanislavski's earlier method of "affective memory"), but rather to replicate them precisely with their bodies so as to make the audience feel them.¹ Whenever Mitchell prepares a new production, she starts by selecting the script's dominant emotions and by asking her actors to re-enact events in their lives where they experienced those same emotions, for the rest of the group to watch. After studying how each emotion affects the body, and concentrating their observations on people's physicality, actors then connect this physical information with particular moments in the play.

In her directorial practice, Mitchell acknowledges the influence of Stanislavsky's "External Physical Action" exercises, proposed in the final years of his theatre work. These techniques were in turn inspired by philosopher-psychologist William James's theory of emotions, as expounded in an article entitled *What is Emotion?* (1884). According to the James-Lange theory,² emotions are initially automatic bodily reactions to stimuli—revealed by posture, gait, gesture, and face expression—and only afterwards become scripted responses of the conscious mind. Correspondingly, in Stanislavsky's and Mitchell's "external approach" to acting, the actor re-creates the external signs of the character's emotions without becoming emotionally involved with the character or action in terms of her personal feelings. Whereas in Stanislavsky's former internal approach, the character grows from within the actor's own subjective emotional memories, and the actor lives the part by actually experiencing specific feelings every time he recreates the role.

Regarding the neural-emotional sources of theatre creativity, a most relevant neuroscientific discovery is that of "mirror-neurons" by a group of Italian neuroscientists that include Vittorio Gallese, starting in the mid-1990s. Mirror neurons owe their name to the fact that they are actively engaged in the process of simulation. They concern behavioral responses that are activated not only when a person is engaged in an action or emotional event, but also when she is just witnessing or viewing that same action or emotional event being performed by others. Most significantly, this capacity to code an analogy between self and others, through gestures, postures or facial expressions, constitutes a shared manifold space of intersubjectivity and a framework of meaning and communication that allows for empathic projection. Such empathy extends beyond the simple fact of understanding the other's emotional state, for it actually ensues from an embodied experience of that state.³

Drawing a variant of the mirror neurons functioning process, Damasio asserts a mechanism that he names "as-if-body-loop," whereby the brain is capable of simulating certain emotional body states internally and creates a set

¹ Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre*, London: Routledge, 2009, 231-232.

² The James-lange theory is thus named because it was proposed, roughly at the same time but independently, by William James and by Danish psychologist Carl Lange.

³ Vittorio Gallese, "The Intentional Attunement Hypothesis The Mirror Neuron System and Its Role in Interpersonal Relations," in *Biomimetic Neural Learning for Intelligent Robots*, ed. S. Wermter, G. Palm, M. Elshaw, Berlin: Springer, 2005, 1-8.

of body maps that does not correspond exactly to the current reality of the body.

In summary, the body-sensing areas constitute a sort of theater where not only the "actual" body states can be "performed," but varied assortments of "false" body states can be enacted as well, for example, as-if-body states, filtered body states, and so on. The commands for producing as-if-body states are likely to come from a variety of prefrontal cortices as suggested by recent work on mirror-neurons in both animals and humans.¹

This mechanism is most relevant for our theatre practice, since it explains how through theatre making and spectating, humans become better able to both grasp others' mental states (theory of mind) and to feel others' emotions (empathy). Aristotle suggested that empathy was central to the theatre through an emotional identification between character (*ethos*) and spectator. Brecht, on the other hand, advocated a non-Aristotelian theatre and thus proposed the distancing effect or alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) as a key element of Epic Theatre, to counter the potentially limiting effects of empathy upon audience members, and instead turn them into active learners who would practice oppositional social transformation outside the theatre.

The significance of both "mirror neurons" and "as-if-body loop" mechanisms for theatre creativity is enormous, because they imply that (whether or not intentionally) we are always emotionally prefocusing our theatre performances, as actors, directors, designers and dramaturgs. As Damasio observes, although human emotional responses are not fixed (since they depend on a number of environmental, social and personal factors), particular stimuli are guaranteed to

produce joy or sadness or apprehension, while certain stories or scenes will evoke compassion or awe. . . we emote positively or negatively when we see colors of certain hues, when we see certain shapes, volumes, and textures, and when we taste certain substances or smell certain odors.²

Likewise in the theatre, performances are inevitably emotionally "prefocused" whenever they have built into them a way of seeing events and characters, a specific order and duration to those events, and a built-in perspective that elicits a particular sort of emotional response, usually resulting from the combined work of the various practitioners involved in the creative process. Every talented actor makes use of her voice, hands, face, posture and stride to compose an emotional score. The same applies to directors, who manage to create emotional effects through timing, blocking, use of space and perspective.

¹ Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 118.

² Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things*, 110.

In the process of emotionally prefocusing one of my most recent dramaturgical and directing works, *Sangue de Lorca* (2019),¹ I enhanced through blocking and choreography the audience's visibility of actors' faces at certain moments throughout the performance, so that spectators were led to emotionally empathize with, or pay a closer attention to, particular scenes or characters. Although emotional effects in the theatre can be highly activated through the use of words (confirming theatre's verbal power), actors' bodies, and above all their faces, are privileged means of expressing thoughts and feelings. In *Sangue de Lorca*, I also made use of the affective import of music, namely through two popular Spanish ballads sung by one of the actresses, and a recurring theme taken from the Aranjuez concert by Joaquín Rodrigo. In effect, music is a form of expression that has an enormous potential of transmitting affect, because it "moves" people,² producing actual physical effects without communicating specific meanings.²

Towards an Affective Thinking in Theatre making

Drives, motivations, emotions, and feelings compose an ensemble that Dutch-Portuguese-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza called affects in a book entitled *Ethics*, first published in 1677. As Damasio observes, many of the advances of contemporary neuroscience of emotions and feelings confirm the suggestions that Spinoza began to articulate in the seventeenth century, although he is mostly absent as a reference. Challenging the antagonism between mind and body of his own time (and which regrettably largely subsists till today), for Spinoza both human mind and body are manifestations of a singular divine substance. This substance registers a continuum of manifestations from micro to macro, from *affections* to *affects*. Such an insinuation that deep down everything is connected resonates with an ecological sensibility for our current times.

According to Spinoza, and within a view of human beings as an inherent part of nature, affects are natural and, as such, subject to the same laws as all other objects and beings. Affect is a lived experience; it is a transition or shift from one state to another in one's own being. Each affect has a particular nature; it strengthens or weakens one's ability to exist. Affects are associated to *Ethics*, because it is through affects that one creates a happy, fulfilled body, a body that experiences potentialities. Further, reason and emotion are not opposites forces: reason needs emotion to become effective, and emotion can be better directed with the help of reason.³ Knowledge is indeed the most potent of affects.

¹ *Sangue de Lorca* (*Blood of Lorca*) opened at *Espaço Hangar Inimpetus* in Lisbon, January 3-17, 2019; and was presented at the Theatre Festival *Festival T* in Albufeira, 29 March 2019. Produced by ArtCom, www.artcom.pt.

² Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect", *M/C Journal* June 2016, <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>. Accessed 13 April 2020.

³ For Plato (428-347 BCE), emotion is present in reason as *eros* or the love of the Good (as evidenced in *The Symposium*). Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) considered emotions as essential to

Inspired by Spinoza's concepts, contemporary philosopher Brian Massumi claims that affect is precognitive and prior to the personal, that it is a field of pure potential that circulates in-between bodies. Because it is non-linguistic and non-personal, affect is separated from the realm of "conscious" emotions; whereas an emotion is a very partial expression of affect, because it only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes, affect incites the passage from one experiential state of the body to another, implying an increase or diminution in that body's capacity to act. "Affect is the invisible glue that holds the world together,"¹ and therefore "provides an excellent lens for thinking of humans as existing in continuity with nonhuman animals."²

Affective thought is thus broader than emotional thought in that it draws not only upon emotions and feelings but also on affects, i.e., on pre-personal, non-conscious and non-linguistic experiences of intensity. Accordingly, we necessarily have to reinvent the concept of affective memory (referring to affects, not affections), differentiating it from emotional memory, as a method of theatrical performance. Such a method implies a shift from the typically dramatic representational model of conscious emotional identification with a character or event, to find other more "virtual" principles of theatre creation.

Theatre director and theorist Rhonda Blair builds her work upon one such dynamic model of complex emotional cognition, i.e., one that denies that an authentic and objective state of being (and thus of a character) can ever exist, adopting instead streams of imagery, sensations, and emotions of a flowing subjectivity that is constantly evolving. Consequently, Blair does not rehearse with emotions retrieved from the actor's personal "material," but rather works through "image streams" produced by the actors' own imaginations. A set of concrete images is suggested at the outset by the playtext's words, which the actors associate to their own image-streams throughout the rehearsal process. These images

are for the purpose of feeling, of vitality, not for 'fact' or information....The actor does not 'play' these choices but merely reacts to the stream of images she has set up as they arise. The images do not need to make 'logical' or even 'biographical' sense, any more than the images that pass through our heads at any given moment of the day make sense.

the good life, but defended moderation or "the mean between extremes." Spinoza recommended that we fight a negative emotion with an even stronger but positive emotion brought about by reasoning and intellectual effort. Central to his thinking was the notion that the subduing of the passions should be accomplished by reason-induced emotion and not by pure reason alone. See Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*, 12.

¹ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, 217, 227.

² Donovan O. Schaefer, "It's not what you think: Affect Theory and Power take to the Stage." *Duke Upress News*, 15 Feb. 2016. <https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2016/02/15/its-not-what-you-think-affect-theory-and-power-take-to-the-stage>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

1 Their purpose is to have psychophysical efficacy in engaging and moving
2 the actor and thereby the audience.¹

3
4 Through the stimulation of the actors' free emotional associations, Blair
5 incites them to create sensory affective images that are connected to a
6 kinesthetic score.

7 8 9 **Creative emotion / Creative intuition**

10
11 Although human neural pathways are all connected, scientists observe that
12 rational thought strongly depends on the capacity for storing memory through
13 writing in various technical and technological devices, whereas emotional
14 states and feelings are recorded independently from such information.²
15 Because emotional memory is stored in the amygdala, it is oftentimes not
16 conscious, representing what Joseph E. LeDoux calls an "implicit memory,"
17 which once it has been created and stored, is remarkably long-lasting and
18 difficult to eliminate. "The brain, in other words, learns and stores many things
19 in networks that function outside of conscious awareness."³

20 Implicit memory recalls the concept of "pure memory" put forward in the
21 early twentieth-century by French philosopher Henri Bergson. In Bergson's
22 view of time, the relation between past and present is one of coexistence rather
23 than succession, and hence memory is nonrepresentational. As Alia Al-Saji
24 explains,

25 As an interconnected and infinitely detailed whole, pure memory remains
26 unconscious (...). The past therefore need not be understood as an abyss, a
27 remote and lost presence. As the memory of the present implies, the past is
28 the invisible lining of present perception, constitutive of the present
29 instant.⁴

30
31 When considered within a unidirectional diagram, the relation between
32 past and present time seems straightforward, as a chronological succession of
33 psychological states. When viewed as non-chronological "duration" with
34 "extra-psychological range," however, time is not internal to consciousness,
35 nor are memories stored within consciousness or in the brain. Rather, as
36 Bergson suggests, it is we who are internal to time. In terms of theatre, whereas
37 in a Stanislavski-type technique, emotional memory is reduced to recollection
38 in the form of souvenir-images, and involves selecting a particular plane of

¹ Rhonda Blair, "Image and action: cognitive neuroscience and actor-training," *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, ed. Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hardt, New York: Routledge, 2006, 180.

² Massey, 19-20.

³ Joseph E. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*, New York: Viking, 2002, 9-10.

⁴ Al-Saji, Alia. "The memory of another past: Bergson, Deleuze and a new theory of time," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004), 216.

1 pure memory and forgetting other planes, in Bergson's pure memory, the
2 image of the passing present is "virtual" and remains unconscious.

3 The potential of Bergson's pure memory is more clearly understood in
4 connection to his concept of creative intuition. Intuition is instinct taken to a
5 higher level, a kind of natural epistemological faculty. As Elena Fell
6 elucidates, "whereas in instinct one's knowledge is bound with one's being in
7 order to preserve and promote it, in intuition our knowledge becomes
8 disengaged from our being and is bound with the being of another entity."¹
9 Unlike rational conscious thought, creative intuition involves an expanded,
10 though fragmented, sense of subjectivity, an extended awareness that occurs at
11 an unconscious level of the psyche. Affectivity opens a particular intensity of
12 remembering that allows one's body to retain the past; memories and histories
13 are not isolated in consciousness, but coexist, collide and interact. As a
14 cognitive-emotional creative faculty, artistic intuition is disengaged from any
15 immediate practical purpose, and is therefore able to grasp the very being of
16 things.

17 Bergson attributes an exceptional role to emotions in all acts of creation. In
18 his view, it is precisely the creative force of emotions and their fabulating
19 function that makes intersubjectivity possible. In *Two Sources of Morality*,
20 Bergson proposes to consider "a very clearly defined faculty of the mind"
21 which is very vivid in children, novelists and dramatists: the fiction-making,
22 fabulation or fantasist faculty [la fonction fabulatrice], "a special faculty of
23 voluntary hallucination:"

24
25 the same faculty comes into play in those who, without creating fictitious
26 beings for themselves, are as interested in fictions as in real things. What
27 sight is there more amazing than that of a theatre audience in tears? (...)
28 [But] we can be almost as completely "gripped" by the novel we are
29 reading, and sympathize just as keenly with the people whose story is
30 being told us. How is it that psychologists have not been struck by the
31 mysterious element in such a faculty as this?²
32

33 According to Bergson, it is impossible to understand the other without
34 becoming the other. Only art makes us surpass that impossibility because it
35 ensues from creative intuition. For Bergson "art is that exclusive domain where
36 the grasp of true Being can be externalized and shared. (...) Through art,
37 humans are linked not just by concepts and knowledge but by a deeper
38 ontological flow of Being."³

39 Creative intuition in art therefore encompasses not only artists-producers
40 but also the beholders of a work of art, or the spectators of a theatre

¹ Elena Fell, *Duration, Temporality, Self: Prospects for the Future of Bergsonism*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2012, 179.

² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. Ashley Audra, C. Brereton and W. Horsfall Carter, London: Macmillan & Co, 1935, 166.

³ Elena Fell, "Bergson's Aesthetics: Art as a Unique Form of Communication," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 4.1 (April 2012), 65.

performance. Similarly to creating a work of art, contemplating it entails an immersion into the object of perception. Thus, the work of art is never final or complete when the artists' creative work is finished; but rather always contingent and charged with that which must follow. Artists initiate a continuity of emotion that the perception and beholding by spectators pick up and extend. Bergson's observations on this phenomena call attention to the enriching aesthetic experience not only of theatre performances but also of playtexts. As I argued elsewhere, contemporary post-dramatic theatre studies often presume that researchers should only approach drama when it has been (or is being) endowed with *liveness* through performance, and otherwise leave the exploration of playtexts for literary critics. However productive explorations focusing almost exclusively on *performance* may be, I suggest that the disparagement of *drama* as an object of study may be jeopardizing one of the specificities of theatre as a space where multiple texts conflate, including that of the playtext.¹ In effect, a drama performed by the reader's own imagination devises a "theatre of the mind" (as nineteenth-century Symbolist artists named it), and is equally an intensely cognitive-emotional creative act.

Affective Thinking in Play

The drive known as "play," noticeable in mammals and birds, is also central to human life, according to Damasio. "Play is the anchor of children's creative imagination, of adolescents and adults; it is a crucial ingredient of the inventions that have defined any culture."² Most recently, perhaps due to the post-dramatic surge of collectively devised theatre, performance production has become increasingly involved with play behavior through movement improvisations, mimicry and exercises of "affective memory" involving not only emotional memory (remembering feelings) but also sense memory (remembering sensations). Theatre is in effect one of the most sophisticated forms of play behavior. Studies have recurrently shown how the involvement in acting training and theatre activities makes human beings gain in empathy, in mind acuity and motivation, and in emotional expression over those involved in other art forms.

Ethologist Ellen Dissanayake argues that all creative acts are behavior forms of "making special."

From at least two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, the archaeological record indicates that species of *Homo* showed a capacity to deliberately make ordinary things in the world extra-ordinary or "special." Natural surroundings (cave walls, rock outcroppings, boulders, small pieces of stone), common artifacts (e.g., tools), and probably ordinary bodies (skin, hair) were made special with engraved or painted

¹ Graça P. Corrêa, *Sensory Landscapes in Harold Pinter: A Study on Ecocriticism and Symbolist Aesthetics*. Saarbrücken: LAP, 2011, 261.

² Damasio, *Strange Order of Things*, 164.

marks. It is likely that special vocalizations (called by us, song) and movements (dance) also occurred at least this early, although they left no material trace.¹

Making special refers to the fact that humans intentionally shape and embellish aspects of their world to make them more than ordinary, thereby attracting attention, evoking and shaping emotion, *having an effect*.”² The persistence of such aesthetic behaviors or predispositions toward artification may have contributed to human beings’ survival and wellbeing. They “demonstrate that as we became *Homo sapiens*, we were at the same time *Homo aestheticus*.”³

Making special characterizes not only art but also two other kinds of human behavior: play and ritual. Art is connected to both of these activities. Like play, it is characterized by novelty and unpredictability, surprise, ambiguity, fantasy, and make-believe, and often performed for its own sake. Like ritual, it provides a form for feelings and is able to conflate several meanings in one feature or symbol, capturing attention and arousing strong emotion.⁴

Rather than having emerged after the development of language, abstract thinking, and other modes of symbolization, according to Dissanayake art played a role in the long pre-verbal history of the human species. This was an art made for life’s sake, and most likely arisen from our inborn propensities for imitation, reciprocity, and emotional communion in infancy. Countering the assumption by most evolutionary theorists that art is either an accidental by-product of more fundamental behaviors, or perhaps a behavior functioning as a form of sexual display, Dissanayake argues that art is an evolutionary behavior because it vitally contributes to community stability and the enrichment of social mutuality, providing significance and emotional support to human beings throughout their lifetimes.

Ethics and Homeostasis through Cognitive-Emotional Artistic Creation

Ethologist Ellen Dissanayake’s observations on art as a multi-millennarian behavior essential to all human societies are very compelling for our present time, whilst the world is undergoing a global pandemic of unknown origins and effects that has caused a closure of performing art productions and collective cultural activities in several countries. Art-behavioral dispositions are universal, and not the exclusive propensity of a few art-inclined individuals, as

¹ Ellen Dissanayake, “‘Aesthetic Primitives:’ Fundamental Biological Elements of a Naturalistic Aesthetics,” *Aisthesis: Pratiche, Linguaggi e Saperi dell’Estetico* 8.1 (2015), 12-13.

² Ibid., 17.

³ Ibid., 19.

⁴ Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, New York: Free Press 1992, 31.

1 Dissanayake argues. Although art-behaviors can be universally practiced,
 2 however, the realization of these potentials greatly depends on social and other
 3 circumstances, as we are learning the hard way. Now is perhaps the time to
 4 grasp how all arts are essential to the wellbeing of the human species, and
 5 hence demand substantially additional financial and infrastructural support,
 6 from both public and private sectors, for human culture and education.

7 As a theatre practitioner and scholar I have always been fascinated by the
 8 way feelings and emotions relate to creativity in the arts, and how the arts in
 9 turn may socially and individually instigate ethical-political effects.
 10 Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has shown that emotions play a key role in
 11 providing various types of natural internal values upon which many complex
 12 behavioral choices in humans are based, and therefore that emotions and
 13 feelings are essential towards ethical thinking. Because emotion is linked to
 14 ethical behavior, failed emotional behavior is the cause of failed ethical
 15 decisions and has potentially disastrous social consequences.¹

16 Anticipating current neuroscientific findings, seventeenth-century
 17 philosopher Baruch Spinoza categorically intertwined affects to ethics.
 18 Through affects our power of acting is increased or diminished, and therefore
 19 affects are central to all ethical processes and outcomes.² To move in an ethical
 20 direction, from a Spinozan point of view, is not to attach pre-set values to
 21 actions based on a system of moral judgments, but instead assess what kind of
 22 potential affects tap into and express. In Spinoza's view, for example, the
 23 affect of joy enables a potent relationship with the world, it is a becoming that
 24 gains more strength, more mobility, more ways of acting. In sadness, on the
 25 contrary, we lose power, our horizon contracts, we move to a lower degree of
 26 participation in nature. Through joy, all organisms strive to achieve a "greater
 27 perfection" of function, or a flourishing of life, within the single divine
 28 substance they belong to.³

29 In a similar vein, according to Bergson, the greatest flow of creative
 30 intuition culminates in an active love, where love refers less to a particular
 31 relation to an object or to a beloved person, and more to a state or attitude of
 32 the soul, of exaltation and welcome. It is a way of being in the world, rather
 33 than a direct attachment to any particular thing in it.⁴ Indeed, for Bergson,
 34 creative emotions are the source of a much-needed open ethics of mutual
 35 understanding and bonding between human beings.

36 Finally, emotions and feelings motivate all creations of human culture.
 37 According to Damasio, feelings are the mental-bodily expressions of

¹ Damasio, "Neuroethics: Mapping the Field," *Conference Proceedings*, ed. Steven J. Marcus, San Francisco: The Dana Foundation, 2002, 22.

² Baruch Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin M. Curley, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. "By affect [*affectum*] I understand affections [*affectiones*] of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas [mental conceptions] of these affections" (154).

³ Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Human Brain*, London: William Heinemann, 2003, 12-13

⁴ Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human rights as a way of life: on Bergson's political philosophy*, Stanford UPress, 2003, 118.

1 *homeostasis*¹ of the very process that regulates life's operations, not only for
2 our survival but moreover for the flourishing of our lives.

3
4 The alignment of pleasant and unpleasant feelings with, respectively,
5 positive and negative ranges of homeostasis is a verified fact. (...) On the
6 face of it, mind and brain influence the body proper just as much as the
7 body proper can influence the brain and the mind. They are merely two
8 aspects of the very same being.²

9
10 Indeed, art may have begun as a homeostatic mechanism for both artists
11 and beholders; and so may have philosophical inquiry and scientific
12 inventiveness. By cooperating with *homeostasis*, theatre and performance
13 creation—whenever developed from ethically joyful creative intuition—will
14 eventually help bring about new better ways of living.

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¹ Physiologist Walter Cannon coined the term homeostasis in 1926 as a "tendency toward stability among interdependent elements". It derives from Greek *homio* "like, similar, equal" and *stasis* "standing still" and refers to any process that living things use to actively maintain fairly stable conditions necessary for survival.

² Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things: Life, Feeling, and the Making of Cultures*, 2018, p.117.

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