

PAR reflective essay

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How can we read somatics and feel semiotics in circus?

The question aims to contradict these seemingly dualistic terms. They can be defined in differing forms, so these are the examples I have chosen to work with for this practical research project.

Somatics- “a field within bodywork and movement studies, which emphasises internal physical perception and experience.”(Serenity Somatics 2020)

Semiotics- “The study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation.” (Houter, 2019)

This reflective essay is guided by a selection of quotes which inspired my process and formed the narrative of the practical presentation. Working backwards or perhaps from the centre outwards, I propose each quote as a branch of the ecosystem developed throughout the research process. Some initial concepts kept growing throughout, while new and more vital ideas overshadowed others. A few branches grew fuller and more in-depth than others, as studio time was limited, and as the methodology relied on the performer’s inner world of feeling, skill and preferences. Branches leaned in certain directions due to prevailing winds of choice and intuition.

In Donna Haraway's semiotic square, she describes connectivity to disrupt binaries. The somatic inner world and the semiotic outer. (Farrar, 2015) The intersection between internal emotion and how a performer expresses themselves and tells a story on stage. As a circus director and my continued work as a performer, I approach circus theatre as a corporeal and adventurous form of storytelling. What Haraway describes as 'speculative fabulation' (Haraway 2016), I translate to this research as a somatic form of telling fables through circus.

The practical work presented did not all directly reflect these long term objectives but was an exposition of the methodologies investigated and their outcomes. The studio sessions were based on the performer's individual experience and interests which formulated the subject matter.

"If we can better understand how we are shaped by our world, we have more power to shape it back"
(Thirdspace Somatics, 2020)

Somatic practitioners describe how our bodies hold memories which affect us subconsciously. The notion of working with subconscious interpretation grew from the seed of this quote.

I theorised, from my own experience of creating circus theatre performance about environmental issues; if a story is told from an internal place of intense feeling, it allows an audience to empathise with that person and therefore the issue.

Embodiment and physical awareness are inherent in circus practices. By becoming deeply aware of what is occurring in both the body and mind during practice, we could slow down and zoom in.

'curiosity fuels the investigation, which leads to new awareness' (Eddy. 2016 , pg23) Using sensory prompts and directions such as 'How does the rope feel' and urging the performer to physicalise the experience, we initially explored the somatic idea of internal perception in the studio.

Working with circus performance and a corde lisse artist, Aimee, the output became inherently semiotic. The rope has its unique qualities to be explored. 'The language and

physical demands of aerial rope offer spatial metaphors of ascent and descent and enable the performer to be removed, or to escape from the horizontal.’ (Murphy, L, 2018)
Every movement and sound held meaning that could be interpreted by an audience.

“Sensations, feeling, insights, fantasies- all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable.”
(Aldous Huxley, 1972, pg 13)

A primary experiment and what became the opening piece of performance in the presentation was a synthesis of the ideas that “Memories inform the body how to act” (Thirdspace Somatics, 2020), and the practice of ‘Active Imagination’.

Carl Jung developed this psychoanalysis technique that has been broadly used within the world of Somatics and Dance therapy. (Williamson, Batson and Whatley, 2014, pg 5) It involves a guided visualisation exercise, followed by, or simultaneously, moving one's body in response to the thoughts that arise.

I asked Aimee to think of a memory that felt joyful and then explore it on the rope. She reflected that ‘it’s a good approach to create material that can speak to emotions by starting from a specific impetus’ (Bennett 2020) The outcome was useful in that I, as the audience, was drawn into her world and could experience her emotion viscerally. I stated in my journal that ‘as a witness, I could feel the moment she entered the world of the memory’ (Greenford 2020)

I unknowingly facilitated a rather literal translation of ‘memories informing the body’. Still, I was intrigued by the result and am eager to further explore and develop it in future work. One aspect which I particularly enjoyed about this method was that it created a narrative without ever having to vocalise it. The feeling did not have to pass through any form of linguistics or be intellectualised, yet it could be passed from performer to audience through physicalisation. As the director, I could choose to provide the audience with a particular context about location or event to either influence or enhance the experience or simply leave it as an interpretive narrative.

***“The symbols of the self arise in the depths of the body”
(Carl Jung, 1958)***

Jungian theory was possibly the most extended branch of research. Three main aspects influenced my work; active Imagination, archetypes and alchemy. I was interested in Jung’s work as it exists within the realms of both science and spirituality, the ‘physical and non-physical’.

The ‘Model of the psyche’, which I displayed in my presentation as a visual context, is based on the idea that consciousness is only a small part of our cognitive function. Most experience occurs in the unconscious part of the psyche. (a.o.i, 2016)

Active imagination, which I used in the studio as a starting point for devising, is a communication between the conscious and the unconscious. A practice which arguably is one of ‘feeling semiotics’. It inspired me to view somatics as conscious unconsciousness and at semiotics as unconscious consciousness.

The archetypes are located within the collective unconscious. Described as ‘psychic structures which are common to all humans’ (a.o.i, 2016) This concept of common knowledge and association could be utilised and developed into methodology in the studio. For example, ‘Water’ holds common semiotic values such as blue, flow and purity. Similarly, with concepts such as ‘Lion’ or ‘Queen’, we can find common descriptions. So assuming that an audience is all located within a similar collective society, there was an area to be explored.

“The right way to wholeness is made up unfortunately of fateful detours and wrong turnings.” (Carl Jung)

Archetypes, as a concept, fertilised the methodology I developed using shapes and language. ‘The shape of meaning’ as I named it on the poster, was a broad and more developed branch of my research. It developed slowly and intuitively.

We worked with improvisations and prompts. I asked Aimee to find particular moves and sequences to reflect each shape. I noted what I saw, semiotically from the outside. It was tricky to watch subjectively as I knew she was embodying a specific shape. In one instance, I

found myself looking for the circular movements as she worked with circles; however, there was a substantial variation between qualities. Each had their semiotic value in terms of conveying meaning. Adding in the silver and gold created even more contrast, especially when one was performed straight after another.

We developed a way of working, a linguistic methodology, in which I could say, 'Silver Circle' and the performer knew which qualities to embody, and I knew what to expect.

***"A language that involves technique AND feeling.. They are intrinsically linked."
(Burgess, R, 2020)***

Aimee shared that this approach 'forces a different direction; it pushed me out of my comfort zone'. She felt that it was 'a useful language that is not story-based'.

What we created was an understanding between director and performer with shared knowledge. It was observed that 'as a tool, it can grow exponentially'. (Priest, J, 2020) That the deeper I can go, the better the outcome would be.

It will be interesting to see how the idea translates to other artists and other circus disciplines and to compare the way it is received. I am aware that what I know from this research is solely how it affected that specific person's practice. It would be beneficial to test it on a range of levels, as Aimee is a trained and talented performer and improviser.

Lastly, in terms of Jung's input, I was intrigued by the concept of alchemy. It wasn't something which became a specific exercise or devising methodology; instead, I viewed it as a way of looking at the work as a whole. Alchemy is about transformation, turning ideas into reality. (w.f.a. 2016) I saw the research as an alchemical process between somatics and semiotics in circus. It highlights the importance of the union of opposites; word and body, somatics and semiotics, making it a useful lens.

For alchemy, one needs a container, and for me, the studio was that container, which facilitated the work.

This rabbit hole was arguably an area of research that I wouldn't say was a completely dead branch, but rather, one that didn't bear much in terms of fruit, although it still seemed useful structurally.

I noticed a duality in methodology, where one can start either from somatics or semiotics and potentially end up in a similar place. In response to the work we did with Charlotte

Mooney in our intensive, I questioned the research I was conducting as it seemed like an opposing method.

Her approach focuses on ‘looking from the outside for meaning; relationship, image and emotion,’ (Mooney, C, 2020) It begins with semiotics to find the inherent feeling. This way of working is well suited to circus theatre but would potentially be difficult for devising work about a specific topic. I returned to the research process with a deeper understanding of the potentiality of a somatic starting point and its counter methods.

“In an instant, an act of speech can change a particular fact about the world.”
(J L Austin, 2020)

Linguistics as a form of semiotics was another research area that I dug into. The output never properly tied into the rest of the work. I did include it in my presentation; however, in feedback, it was the part that seems ‘other’. I spent one studio session focusing on it specifically. Aimee was injured so I worked with Ryan, which I enjoyed as it was a different skill set and he was an excellent improviser.

The final exercise I prepared, involved creating a physical sequence including text, from an active imagination/personal story, and then experimenting with changing the linguistic style. A concept inspired by the book, ‘exercises in style’. (Queneau, 2012). I found it fascinating how a single word and intention could transform the narrative and provide a different context.

Jaques Lacan stated that we are ‘stuck within our own linguistic matrix’ (Vinokur, T, 2018) I found this accurate within my directing practice, often searching for accurate words to express myself. He emphasises that a signifier does not necessarily equal the signified; the word apple cannot underpin the entirety of real fruit. Gottlob Frege’s theory of sense and reference describes that meaning equals use. (c.c. 2016) The idea that it’s impossible to communicate our subjective experiences directly. He questioned whether our feelings really feel the same. The concept of pain isn’t the feeling but the sounds and symbols associated with it; crying, swearing and facial expressions.

Research into the communication between performer and audience and how to be sure that the implied meaning matches what is received, I thought, was a relevant subject worth exploring. Other concepts I was eager to include within linguistics were; implicature,

flouting maxims, pragmatics, syntax and various types of metaphor such and metonymies. Unfortunately, time was limited and I prioritised other, more pertinent aspects.

Aimee is well practised at working with text, and it could have been a healthy growth, but limitations and other ideas buried it in the undergrowth. Perhaps semantics is something I can come back to in another research project.

The extent of my application of this to my work in the wider picture resulted in me writing ‘trees are not useless’ in my journal. At the time, this felt like a seed of something important but now seems like an extremely underwhelming and laughable conclusion to all of the intellectual concepts I explored. This was rabbit hole number two.

“Mystics swim in the waters in which psychotics drown.”
(Priest, J, Campbell, J, 2020)

This quote guided me through the project by allowing me to let my imagination dance and play and not take the outcomes too seriously. Of course, I wanted to ‘get results’, but it allowed me to question why this was all so important to me anyway. It helped me look at things from the wider angle of wanting to make work that engages with a climate crisis, ecology, and how we can potentially help. In the words of Donna Haraway, how we can ‘stay with the trouble’. I am endlessly curious about how and why circus theatre is a fruitful artform to engage in this type of work. I believe the answer can only be found by pushing forwards.

“Porous Borders of all kinds.” (Donna Haraway, 2015)

A dense but intricate branch of my presentation that didn’t apply directly to the studio, yet it fed into the other aspects, was Haraway’s semiotic square. It felt important structurally, so I shared my ideas of how it translated into my practice.

All binaries can be dissected within the semiotic square, with social nature at the centre. Social nature being ‘real knowledge and action’. For me, this is the praxis and the storytelling; the concept of connectivity to interrupt the ‘others’ or anything that doesn’t fall on the extreme ends of perceived binary linear scales. Rather, rounding the edges and

exploring the space between; feminine and masculine, wild and technological, space and earth, somatics and semiotics and all of the expanse in between.

This knowledge has encouraged a fluidity within my process of directing that I will take forward. Questioning the need for linear narrative and an awareness that I can guide the artists I work with to search between what is regarded concrete, towards unusual ideas and to observe what can be nurtured between the cracks.

“In the intellectual woodlands, adventures lead to more adventures and treasures lead to further treasures.” (Ursula Le Guin)

The pieces of work that closed the presentation were devised using a combination of methods explored throughout the research phase.

‘Devising as an ecosystem’ is a synthesis based on a writing technique, ‘writing as an ecosystem’ (Lamb, 2020) The idea is to generate a non-linear narrative, layering ideas and surrounding the central idea from multiple angles and depths. It ties into the idea of Jung’s model of the psyche and the unconscious in which ‘the act of becoming conscious consists in the concentric grouping of symbols around the object, circumscribing the unknown from many sides.’ (a.o.i, 2016)

This is also the basis of how I designed my presentation structure, with my question at the centre and the components positioned around it, each giving its own viewpoint and helping to form a somatic experience of the ‘answers’ through the semiotic work.

Conceptual ideas for this methodology are the evolution of the practices I already utilise in my own work: text, analogy and physical metaphor.

The central idea of our ecosystem was the squirrel, it arose as part of an active imagination in which I invited Aimee to become a tree, I then asked her to choose a creature that lived in the tree. She chose a squirrel. I then guided her through the devising process, creating a diagram, with the subject at the centre. The next step was to write associated words and thirdly, how those words relate back to her circus apparatus.

Then I set a creative writing task. The words she chose from the diagram were; scavenger, elusive, leap, energy stores and risk of falling.

I am eager to facilitate devising within an ecosystem of performers, a group working in the same system, on various apparatuses and with individual personal stories.

Certainly, aspects of this process were not smooth and involved having to take a step backwards. I learned that coming to a space with too much of a specific idea wasn't helpful and that to get there I must go slowly. I did, at times feel confused as to whether it was my instruction that wasn't working or if it was in the receiving, but this gave me a chance to take a step back and allow the process to move in its own direction, reacting accordingly to unanticipated change or circumstance.

The final aspect of this devising process for what was presented comes back to the shapes and how we combined these creative processes. We narrowed down to three pieces of text, three ideas. Then we identified the shape we most associated with each phrase. Aimee was then given the artistic freedom to combine the text with the correlating shape and her own trick base and knowledge.

It may seem like a complicated process, nevertheless, the initial stages allow for a performer to work on their own while letting the director observe and take notes. This may make it a practical devising tool for working with artists that aren't well known to the director. There is no need for extensive knowledge of their skill set.

“The world is a story, writing itself.” (Katie Holden, 2020)

This concluding quote encompasses, for me, the connection between circus, ecology and storytelling. An artist will carry on practising, the world will keep turning, and as a director and human, I can work and weave these outside forces to create what I believe is meaningful performance art.

It almost feels like I have abandoned the differences between somatics and semiotics, as I now see the space in between as something which may not need to be defined or intellectualised but something that occurs subconsciously, or by the archetypal structures of our psyche, between intention and the way an audience receives semiotic seeds. I do not suggest that they are the same, but that by operating from a more fluid angle, the edges of a concept needn't be defined or closed, but open to individual interpretation. In any piece of circus skill performance, there is a feeling, and there is a visual. The two are linked in a way which even the most articulate human would struggle to describe in a way which does justice to the intricate layers of somatics and semiotics concerned.

By starting to create from inner somatic roots, the subject matter holds a delicateness and a depth that affects the semiotic qualities and reflects the performers' internal experience.

My directing role has been mainly as a facilitator. I am aware that this research focused more on the creation of methodology than on refinement techniques. Something I am aware that I will need to improve for a fully rounded skill set. I have, however, realised my passion for devising processes and finding ways of making work, about things, in new ways. These new methodologies are centred around a somatic/semiotic approach, beginning with our inner world and then moving outwards through the studio, stage, and audience.

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