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# **The fundament or the fog?**

Research paradigms I am influenced of

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## Introduction

My research is related to narratives in stories based on memories, and staged as small performances. I have called my practice echo theatre. I am concerned about the body based story, and the reflection that can emerge from the performative aspects of it. The neurologist Oliver Sachs<sup>1</sup> claims that storytelling is rooted in the body, and that storytelling as a ground phenomenon is founded on our body based identity. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur<sup>2</sup> view stories as a means of creating meaning and building an identity. He writes about the dialectics between what we are who we are, and that the bridge between these is the told ethics that gives us a continuous identity. The staging of the biographical stories can help support the grip on storytelling structure and the construction of meaning, and in this way help strengthen the stories identity building qualities.

*The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.*<sup>3</sup>

In echo theatre, a person tells a story from his or her life. This story is then performed in front of the teller by other members of the group or class. The teller may need a little help with expressing the memory in mind, and the performers are given helpful instructions concerning character, plot, time and space. The story is then echoed through this embodied performance.

According to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>4</sup> all communication starts with the body present in space, and the language is always intentional in the way that it directs itself to the word at the same time as it wants to seize the word. The staging of the stories underline the storytelling in a way that emphasises the body, thought and speech in a need of objectivising the world. At the same time it opens the storytelling for reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> Sacks, Oliver (1997): *The Island of the Colorblind and Cycad Islands*. Vintage Books Edition

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, Paul (1990/1994): *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur 1994:147-8

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945/2003): *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge London & New York

My research is a practice led qualitative research project based on my own practice with echo theatre. Writing about qualitative research, Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln<sup>5</sup> refers to the research paradigms as a basic set of beliefs that may guide our action as researchers. However I have also noted that the paradigms are only human constructions. The researcher has to engage the ethical, ontological, epistemological and methodological in a dialog. The qualitative researcher is as a possible interpretive bricoleur, and being aware of the fact that we are living in a historical moment, we have the freedom to see the world *not only* in one colour. The aim is not to reach for one single truth or to perform the research according to one single conventional paradigm. This also means that the research paradigms and perspectives may be blurred, but it is still important to try to describe the foundation or starting point for the research one is aiming to achieve<sup>6</sup>. I have started out researching one golden moment of my storytelling praxis, and to begin with phenomenology was the most obvious research paradigm to relate my work to.

### **The phenomenological research paradigm**

Phenomenology as a philosophical movement began in the twentieth century with the works of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Germany, and Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in France. The focus in phenomenology is on how the world is perceived of the people actually living in it, and not about how the world as it exist in it self and by itself. Human perception, actions, and thoughts with the sense of time, memory and intention are in the centre of the researchers' attention. (Fortier 1997<sup>7</sup>, Garner 1994<sup>8</sup>, Welton 1999<sup>9</sup>.)

Phenomenological research tries to explain basic aspects of what it is like to have a living body and a consciousness. This is a theoretical approach almost opposite the semiotics who is concerned about how our communication may be understood and explained as a system of signs. Phenomenological research differs from literary

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<sup>5</sup> Denzin, Norman K. and Lincoln, Yvonna S. (2003): Paradigms and Perspectives in contention. In *Qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2003

<sup>6</sup> Denzin/Lincoln 2003:183ff

<sup>7</sup> Fortier, Mark (1997): *Theory/Theatre – an introduction*. Routledge London & New York

<sup>8</sup> Garner Jr., Stanton B (1994): *Bodied Spaces – Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*. Cornell University Press

<sup>9</sup> Welton, Donn (1999): *The Body*. Blackwell Publishing

research and cultural theory in its focus on the individual consciousness<sup>10</sup>. Thus phenomenological consciousness is perceived as autonomous research that is capable of reflection. The clear emphasis on the body and its senses is another area where phenomenology diverges from the theoretical lenses as deconstruction, semiotics and literary research.

*Phenomenology's primary concern is with the engagement in lived experience between the individual consciousness and reality, which manifests itself not as a series of linguistic signs but as sensory and mental phenomena.*<sup>11</sup>

Living in the world means to encounter other people and both to watch and being watched by others. Phenomenology is concerned about the individual in a context and is influenced by others and not only by her or himself alone.

### **The phenomenology of the Body**

The relationship between personal stories and performance is the focus in my project. I am concerned about the body based story, and the reflection that can emerge from the performative aspect of it. For my research the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has been a major influence. In the book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes his philosophy of existence. He refers to a body based consciousness that includes thought, speech and action, and in this he underlines the importance of the body.

*To be a consciousness or rather to be an experience is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them.*<sup>12</sup>

The human body's relation to the world is existential. The body is a perceptive, emotional, feeling, talking phenomena. We can not isolate the perception into parts, it is relating to holistic projects. The human body inhabit the space not only as a geometrical or physical room. It is a dynamic room open to actions, and the space can

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<sup>10</sup> Fortier 1997/2003:40

<sup>11</sup> Fortier 2003:41

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002:111

have many interpretations for the individual. The different body parts can only be known through actions, and by these actions they get a functional value. When the baby reaches for the toy, he or she looks at the toy and not at the hand reaching for it. Therefore, if we shall talk about interpretation of the body, the body interprets itself.

*We must therefore avoid saying that our body is in space or in, time. It inhabits space and time.*<sup>13</sup>

Communication starts with the body's existence and being in space. The human body is not like an object or a machine, but *has* or *is* in a pre-objective relationship to the world. Incorporated in this relationship is that the body has an intention, and that it is corresponding in a way of understanding to the world. Hence the body and thus the outside world are both referring to each other, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to this notion as *a state of being in the world*. The body is not only in a room or space, but *is being* in this space.

*The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates 'a kind of reflection' which is sufficient to distinguish it from objects, of which I can indeed say that they 'touch' my body, but only when it is inert, and therefore without ever catching it unawares in its exploratory function.*<sup>14</sup>

Logically then, we direct ourselves towards the world first and foremost through the body, and we do have an essential bodily foundation in the situation. At the same time there is a relationship of tension connected to being a body and having a body. From this comes the conscious reflection as a need of objectivising the world, and following this reflection that we need to communicate. The tension lies in this meeting, where our body, thought and speech proceed in a communicative relationship with those that we meet.

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<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002:161

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty 2002:107

## Phenomenology and performance

Stanton B. Garner has a phenomenological approach to theatre in his book *Bodied Spaces*. He looks at theatre as perceptually and materially oriented in terms of spectator, actor, and character. He explains phenomenology as an *observational stance*, and refers to the philosophical tradition with the inspiration of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur. In spite their differences, and the use of phenomenology in different subject matters, Garner refers to a similar set of aims being conceivable in the philosophers' works, which is:

*To redirect attention from the world as it is conceived by the abstracting, "scientific" gaze (the objective world) to the world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject (the phenomenal world); to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience; to return to perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment.*<sup>15</sup>

Garner refers to the performance as having a scenic duality. This duality consists of the scenic space and the environmental space. The scenic space is the event as experienced by the spectator, and the environmental space is the space as "subjectified (and inter-subjectified) by the physical actors who body forth the space they inhabit".<sup>16</sup>

*From this perspective, theatrical space is phenomenal space, governed by the body and its spatial concerns, a non-Cartesian field of habitation which undermines the stance of objectivity and in which the categories of subject and object give way to a relationship of mutual implication.*<sup>17</sup>

The perceptual and the habitational may be seen as an ambiguity present in the performance field, and in the centre of this is the body both as subject and object. Garners book is concerned about the body as the agent of theatrical experience, and in

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<sup>15</sup> Garner 1994:2

<sup>16</sup> Garner 1994:3

<sup>17</sup> Garner 1994:4

the focus on embodiedness. In this Garner draws particularly insights from the works of Merleau-Ponty.

Theatre researcher Simon Shepherd has just recently published the book *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*<sup>18</sup>. He describes theatre as an art of bodies.

*Theatre is a practice in which societies negotiate around what the body is and means.*<sup>19</sup>

The negotiation around the body is important because what is conceived as good, right, natural and possible are grounded in the body and assumptions of what the body is or are capable of doing. This concerns social, moral and political values, and they are attached to the body shape, size, colour and movement. These negotiations also refer to body and what can be called non-body.

There is a contemporary interest in the body. Shepherd sees feminism as one of the key initiators of a renewed interest of the body in performance and theatre. The challenge on gender often uses body art, and a great amounts of work that explore the female body, the woman's social role, and how the body was represented. Shepherds work also challenges the notion of the body and mind split whereas the body has been seen as irrelevant to ideas of reason. Another area where we can trace the emergence of an interest in the body is in new theatre forms. There is a focus shift towards the actor and away from the text or the dramatist, and we see the growth of devised theatre, performance art and body art from the late 60s and onwards. Works from different subject areas are claiming the importance of the body for our perception, understanding and development.

Theatre researcher Philip Zarrilli<sup>20</sup> argues that Merleau-Ponty's book *Phenomenology of perception* marks a change of paradigms in connection to our understanding of the body's role in constituting an experience. Already with the works of Konstantin

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<sup>18</sup> Shepherd, Simon (2006): *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*. Routledge London & New York

<sup>19</sup> Shepherd 2006:1

<sup>20</sup> Zarrilli, Phillip B. (ed.)(2002): *Acting (Re) Considered*. Routledge, New York



Stanislavski<sup>21</sup> on actor training, we can see the phenomenological concerns. The actor uses his or her memory actively to create truth on the stage. Through his description of the method of physical actions, Konstantin Stanislavski is reassuring the link between body, thought and feelings. Theatre director Jerzy Grotowski<sup>22</sup> talks about finding *the stream of life* through working with physical actions. Grotowski once held a lecture where he talked about the physical action of remembrance. “If someone is remembering something, observe what happens to his body.”<sup>23</sup>

Theatre director and pedagogue Jacques Lecoq<sup>24</sup> has in his book *The Moving Body* written about how *the laws of movement govern all theatrical situations*. Here Lecoq explains a model that can be referred to as the genesis of the movement, and this model can be linked to a model of the genesis of the story, both having the same ground structure, as a wave. Performance artist and theorist Rudolf Schechner's<sup>25</sup> last findings are connected to *Rasaesthetics*. He asks where in the body one can find theatricality. To answer this questions he compares the *Poetics* of Aristotle<sup>26</sup> with the Sanskrit manual of performance and performance theory; *The Natyasastra* (NS). Rasa has to do with the sharing of emotions, and the centre for the emotions is believed to be situated in the gut, connected to the enteric nervous system.

Radical efforts from different theatre groups have searched to strengthen the focus of the body, and this has changed theatre praxis. Physically oriented actor training is widely approved, and more vividly used in recent years. Therefore the shaping of a character is submitted to a psycho-physical effort that requires that the actor develops both physical discipline and self-control. Thus there is a division between the everyday life's experience of feelings and the similar, but different, texture of theatrical emotions. From the *actor as interpreter* of a theatre text, the new paradigm is the *actor creating*. This is in contrast to the recreating of ordinary life on stage which was part of the realism era, and it is also a continuing of the back to basic theatre of the

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<sup>21</sup> Stanislavskij, Konstantin (1951/1991): *Skuespillerens ytre teknikk*. Nyt Nordisk Forlag

<sup>22</sup> Richards, Thomas (1995): *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*. Routledge, London and New York

<sup>23</sup> Richards 1995:30

<sup>24</sup> Lecoq, Jacques (2001): *The moving Body*. Routledge, New York

<sup>25</sup> Schechner, Rudolf (2001): *Rasaesthetics*. In *Drama Review* 45,3

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle (335fKr/1997): *Om diktekunsten*. Grøndahl og Dreyers forlag, Oslo

actors work. Different new actor training techniques, as represented by Suzuki, Alexander, Laban, Barba and others confirms this:

*Common to all these techniques is their raw material, the human body. While that is obvious enough, different methods define, value and maintain awareness of the body in different ways. It may be the casing for an emotional inner life; it may be the substance to be purged; it may become transcendent through disorderly sensualities; it may work as mechanically as a puppet. What remains in common is that it is a living entity that occupies a finite amount of space and has its own mass, energy and motor capacity. It is a material presence. As such it produces knowledge of itself and impacts upon the senses of others.*<sup>27</sup>

According to phenomenology, seeing is also embodied. The same is true of hearing and speaking. And this is what happens in theatre, with a group of bodies. In their research and practice the theatre reformers are all concerned about the connections between movement and emotions. You are not supposed to impose the emotions with the thoughts, but let the body work for you. Their work differs in some aspects, but does also have many similarities. It is based on working with the body and from the body to give presentations and interpretations of human life.

Echo theatre acknowledges and asks for *who* the person is. It spotlights the person's life-story, and in the performance by the *others*, the narration is manifested in time, body and space. To the teller of the story, this seems to support identity, and sometimes even suggest a hint of unity, linked to the storyteller's life story. Echo theatre is an echo of the biographical story, but when it is staged the storyteller experiences the story from the *outside*. This gives him or her change to view the story also through the perspectives of the other characters in it. In this way echo theatre gives an opportunity to be both reflective and self reflective.

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<sup>27</sup> Shepherd 2006:6

## The fundament or the fog?

Sharon Grady<sup>28</sup> talks about the importance of being conscious of the relationship between theoretical lenses, filtering paradigms and methodological tools in research. This is not always easy as what is a paradigm may change to become a theoretical lens and vice versa. The theoretical lens is the appropriate angle you are looking from as a researcher, and the time you are working in. To see this and describe it alongside the research process, will always be a challenge.

In our time there seems to be an increase of narrative enquiry both in social, hermeneutical and other sciences. Susan E. Chase<sup>29</sup> writes about it as being “a rich but diffuse tradition, multiple methodologies in various stages of development, and plenty of opportunities for exploring new ideas, methods, and questions”.

John Law<sup>30</sup> has written a book called *Messy methods*. He is concerned about the methodologies creating social realities, rather than detecting them. In this way he claims that the methods are always political. He is challenging the dominant hegemony of quantitative/qualitative methods by talking about method as vague, loose, and sometimes messy in the way different realities overlap and interfere with each other. He is not against the use of traditional methods, but he questions the normativity often related to the use of them.

*We need new philosophies, new disciplines of research. We need to understand that our methods are always more or less unruly assemblages.*<sup>31</sup>

Brad Haseman<sup>32</sup> has written a manifesto for a new performative paradigm more suited to inquiries in practice-led research. He is inspired from speech act theory and J.L. Austin's<sup>33</sup> notion of performativity.

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<sup>28</sup> Grady, Sharon (1996:60pp): *Toward the Practice of Theory in Practice*. In Taylor Philip (ed.): *Researching drama and arts education – Paradigms and possibilities*. Routledge Falmer

<sup>29</sup> Chase, Susan E (2003:651): *Narrative Inquiry – Multiple lenses, Approaches, Voices*. In Denzin, Norman K and Lincoln, Yvonna S.: *Paradigms and Perspectives in contention*. In *Qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2003

<sup>30</sup> John Law (2004): *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. Routledge: London

<sup>31</sup> Law 2007:11

<sup>32</sup> Haseman, Brad (2006): *A Manifesto for Performative Research*. In *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, theme-issue “Practice-led Research”, no. 118, February 2006, pp 99-106.

*In this third category of research – alongside qualitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words) – the symbolic data works performatively. It not only expresses research but in that expression becomes research itself.* <sup>34</sup>

This is the fog that this paper has led me into. The good thing is that I look forward to continue my research being aware of this necessary *messiness*. The next step is to look into the video recordings of my practice with echo theatre. In doing this I am sure that more insight into narrative inquiry, performative research and the messiness of methods will be a valuable complement to the phenomenological research paradigms.

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<sup>33</sup> Austin, J.L. 1962: <http://uccstuff.com/FALL2003/j-l-austin.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Haseman 2006:5

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