The Realistic Acting Method as a Mechanism of Attenuation of the Actor's Presence in Theatre and Cinema

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ABSTRACT – The Realistic Acting Method as a Mechanism of Attenuation of the Actor's Presence in Theatre and Cinema – We have analyzed the realistic acting methodology as a mechanism of attenuation of the actor's presence. We consider that Stanislavski's *system* constituted the first technical resolution to an old aspiration for the transparency of the scene toward the referent. For that, the realistic acting method proposes the reduction of the disruptive nature of the public exhibition of the actor's body and action through a series of procedures that will be analyzed in this paper.
Keywords: **Acting. Presence. Realism. Event. Transparency.**

RÈSUMÉ – La Méthode d'Action Réaliste comme Dispositif d'Atténuation de la Présence dans le Théâtre et le Cinema – Dans le présent travail nous nous proposons d'analyser la méthode d'action réaliste comme dispositif de réduction de la présence de l'acteur. Nous estimons que le *système* Stanislavski a constitué la première et la plus achevée résolution technique à une longue aspiration par la transparence de l'énoncé scénique vers le concernant. Pour cela, la méthode d'action réaliste a été proposé de réduire la nature inquiétant de l'exposition publique du corps et de l'action de l'acteur à travers une série de procédures qui nous analyserons dans cet article.
Mots-clés: **Performance. Présence. Réalisme. Événement. Transparence.**

RESUMEN – La Metodología de Actuación Realista como Dispositivo de Atenuación de la Presencia del Actor en Teatro y Cine – En el presente trabajo nos proponemos analizar la metodología de actuación realista como dispositivo de atenuación de la presencia del actor. Consideramos que el *sistema* Stanislavski constituyó la primera y más acabada resolución técnica a una larga aspiración por la transparencia del enunciado escénico hacia el referente. Para ello, se propuso reducir el carácter disruptivo y acontecimental de la exhibición pública del cuerpo y de la acción del actor a través de una serie de procedimientos que analizaremos en este artículo.
Palabras-clave: **Actuación. Presencia. Realismo. Acontecimiento. Transparencia.**

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Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2237-266069587>

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Introduction

In the past few decades, theatre and cinema have had a series of innovations that have given the idea that realism and the realistic acting method are outdated. Researchers, critics and artists themselves show a singular distance with that aesthetic. However, realism reappears over and over on the stage (sometimes only as a language game on the *postdramatic scene*), while some of its procedures persist in acting and directing classes, confused with essential rudiments of training or staging. Furthermore, it is omnipresent and unquestionable in film acting. Thereby, realism remains in Western modes of representation, which becomes symptomatic because it is not perceived or is completely denied. For these reasons, we will reflect on the influence of those implied ideas in acting.

Due to its nature as an event and exhibition[1], acting has an irrefutable political dimension. Thus, any reflection about acting forms confronts us with the problems of the body and representation. In fact, each acting performance involves collective ideas about subjectivity and the symbolic, and their relationships with the moral, ideological and aesthetic imperatives which struggle for hegemony in any society.

In this sense, the realistic acting method constitutes the exponent of a concern (common in modern Western theatre) for consolidating a *pedagogical relationship* between stage and spectators. Thus, Stanislavski's *system* was the first and most complete technical resolution to an old ethical aspiration: the dominance of the transitive dimension of representation[2], that is, of more transparency toward the referent.

This idea, for a long time longed for, achieved its full expression in Modern Drama (Szondi, 1994), a form which incarnates the ideals of a theatre made by and for the bourgeoisie, who desired to watch their debates, conflicts and aspirations reflected on stage. Thus, the dialogue as a closed dialectic crystallized as the most appropriate form of scenic expression for social and political matters. It is not a chance result that this coincided with the consolidation of the director's role as guarantor of sense in staging.

This increased the importance of the rehearsal in the theatrical phenomenon. However, acting continued to manifest itself as the scenic

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element most reluctant to subsume itself to transitive representation. In fact, as an event, acting possesses an irreducible opacity[3], which plays down any type of previous planning of the scene[4]. Consequently, acting produces a non-univocal reference that promotes more complex and ambiguous senses than those produced exclusively by discourse or any instance which intends to establish a *theological* scene, in Derrida's terms (1967).

The solution provided by Stanislavsky's *system* consists in the reduction of the reflexivity (Chartier, 1996) of acting, through its subordination to experiencing. Thus, experiencing becomes a device that promotes the introjection, by the actor, of the *given circumstances* emanated from the subtext. That promotes the subsequent staging, too. In this way, every external sign produced by the actor will have correlation with an experience, which determines the enormous success and extraordinary dissemination of the *system* in Western theatre.

Contemporaneously, first cinema, called *cinema of attractions* (Gaudreault, 2007), emerged as a popular spectacle that had no prestige. Thus, the actors of this cinema were artists of varieties, vaudeville and circus, scenic forms that were far from realism and the modern ideals. However, in the second decade of 20th century, cinema was organized around narrative integration and became institutionalized. Since then, film acting was inclined to the attenuation of gestures and the elimination of theatrical remains. Therefore, naturalism became an objective and the realistic acting method, which was already prestigious, began to be applied in cinema, which continues until now.

The Bourgeois Aspiration to Realism

The history of Western theatre could be entirely rewritten as an attempt to avoid the disruption caused by acting. In this sense, the development of Western theatre is more a systematic denial (and the various forms that it has adopted over the centuries) than an assertion, a fact which is not noticeable in the mere study of dramatic texts. Definitely, the postponement of the study of staging, only legitimized by the appearance of direction, the reduction of the reflection on acting to a simple summary of methodologies and an obstinate absence of analysis of

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the relations of production in theatre, are a consequence of considering theatre as a discursive phenomenon.

In this context, we consider that the significance of the realistic acting method, which has had an extended dissemination and acceptance since its emergence in the late 19th century, can only be analyzed if we adopt a historical perspective. This implies analyzing the relationship between the characteristics of realism and the historical context of its emergence, in order to understand to what extent those postulates respond to the view of a special group of society, to its particular idea about art and theatre and about a previous theatre that it opposed. This allows us to understand that the realistic acting method, generally considered as the essence or basis of acting, has not got a univocal or ahistorical sense.

The propensity toward realism is a constant in Western culture, which takes us to the referent issue. Indeed, already since the Greeks, this matter has appeared in the dichotomy between the transparency toward a referent that preexists representation, or the opacity of representation whose result or *rest* is a referent built by it. Ultimately, the pursuit of transcendence about what is exhibited on the scene is the evidence of a didactic function attributed to theatre, whereby a group assumes the role of tutor.

Though the figure of the *emancipated spectator* of that tutoring, Jacques Rancière questions the way Western culture has understood the political dimension of theatre and all forms of spectacle in which the body acts in front of an audience. We are interested in pointing out the *distribution of the sensible* (2006) implicit in those ideas, because they define *a priori* positions, capacities and incompetence linked to them. Thanks to that distribution, a group proclaims itself as intermediary between reality and the scene, a relationship that will be established according to its own worldview and its own interests, to offer the representation as a final product to another group, called *audience*.

Now, what particular characteristics does this distribution of the sensible assume in realistic theatre? In what ways is the referent problem resolved in realism? How is this expressed in an acting method? Finally, how does an ethical imperative translate into an aesthetic program? We must distinguish three facets of realism which are usually perceived as fused. On the one hand, realism is a mode of construction of statements or a

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mode of representation with particular characteristics. On the other hand, realism is a sense effect, the production of illusion of reference or transparency, thanks to which the represented appears as a world where the things themselves are shown as they occur. Lastly, realism is a specific method of producing realistic acting, generally identified with Constantin Stanislavski's *system*.

Thus, a statement can be perceived as *realistic* (that is, it may have a realistic sense effect) even if its constructive elements or the method of acting employed have not been strictly realistic[5]. This admits the inverse assertion: the realistic staging of a realistic dramatic text does not always promote the illusion of reference (which derives in part from the contingent nature of what is perceived as verisimilitude, which changes with time).

We believe that the realistic dramaturgy and staging, and the acting method postulated in accordance with them, produce a particular illusion of approximation to the referent. But this is not the only possible approximation. The illusion of reference in realism is not the result of a set of procedures for capturing reality objectively. Instead, that illusion is the result of concealing the mechanism of the construction of representation. Indeed, hiding the composition work creates the illusion of approach to the referent, because this transforms the perception of a representation into an impression of reality. It is about organizing the representation around a blind spot, an "optic of vision that does not let itself be seen" (Dittus, 2013, p. 84). This concealment of the composition work produces a rhythmical continuity whose sense effect is the approach to reality. In scenic terms, realism is, produces and depends on the artificial and illusory construction of a continuous fluidity of the representation, without excesses or interruptions. This apparent fluidity and plainness of representation promotes a sensation of transparency. For that reason, realism is known as a *styleless style* (Nochlin, 1991).

Consequently, if composing a realistic representation consists in producing a rhythmical continuity, it will be necessary to eliminate any disruptions, that is, to subdue all scenic components to a "normalization". How does this occur?

First, by erasing any traces of construction of the dramatic plot by the elimination of the *subject of the epic form*, which Peter Szondi (1994)

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identifies in the Modern Drama. Created during the Renaissance, as an expression of man turned to himself after the collapse of the medieval worldview, Modern Drama is an artistic form where he confirms and looks at himself. Szondi states that the subjects of drama are projections of the historical subject. Thus, there is no distance between characters and audience. Therefore, Drama is the expression of the rising bourgeoisie and proclaims itself as the canon around 1860.

Now, Drama implies realism and its procedures. Not surprisingly, the peak of Drama coincides with the appearance of realism. Although realism is in continuous discussion, historically it is a movement or style that emerged in the middle of the 19th century, according to the spirit of the time in which science, philosophy, literature and arts are included. As we stated before, it is not possible to describe realism in absolute terms, but as a reaction to the previous theatre. That is, realism can only be understood as an opposition to both the idealization and the schematic forms of Neoclassicism, and the subjective expressivity of Romanticism.

Realism adopted an ethical commitment to the sincerity of representation, which implies the subordination of the aesthetic dimension to the theme, eliminating the superficiality of conventions. Thus, realism constituted a moral attitude toward the problems of its time, or more precisely, toward a vision of that time according to the interests, objectives and values of the bourgeoisie which was already in its center. In this sense, in art and literature, realism consisted in a critical analysis of society, through fictions that based their illusion of reference in the representation of contemporary conflicts with a plausible background in temporal, spatial, historical or imaginary terms.

In theatre, this means the elaboration of a story apparently developed by characters, that is, a story not produced by an external subject. For that, the removal of any traces of enunciation is necessary. That implies the elimination of the "subject of the epic form", present in the epopee and the novel. Consequently, theatrical dialogue, as an expression of the debate of ideas (the basis of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere), is the privileged form of Drama[6]. In this way, the dialogue as a *personal encounter* (Pellettieri, 1997) is established as a closed dialectic, an absolute entity. In Drama, the author is absent; he does not intervene because he has given the

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right to speak to the characters. Therefore, characters acquire great importance.

On the one hand, the character occupies the central place as the basis of verisimilitude (that is, the transparency of representation). So, the character acquires features as a fictional biographical entity, endowed with a past and present life, with physical and psychological traits, emanating from the dramatic text. Unlike tragedy or comedy, the dramatic character is leveled with man or, more exactly, with its audience, the bourgeoisie. The character, who acts and feels according to the circumstances (an illusionism by which Drama does not present itself as the secondary exhibition of something original), is the agent of the author and the spectator, who watches an image of himself reflected on stage.

On the other hand, the scene is a parallel world, without communication with the audience except for the spectators' identification with the character. This parallel world is governed by a strict spatial coherence and causal motivation, by which present becomes past only if it generates a transformation. Thus, the realistic drama is based on a series of conventions that are concealed by the logic of cause and effect.

This kind of dramatic texts requires (and depends on) a staging which affirms the verisimilitude of representation. That explains the appearance of the director in the late 19th century. This new role is no longer restricted to indicating entrances and exits of the scene, but he becomes the guarantor of the transparency of representation. This is carried out through a strategic design of staging, following Michel De Certeau (2007). De Certeau names *logic of strategic action* the calculation of the relationship of force which is possible when a subject of power isolates and circumscribes its own place. That is an order according to which the elements are distributed in coexistence, excluding the possibility of two elements being in the same place. It provides a stable structure which makes possible a position of retreat, distance and caution. Thus, this structure can give itself a global and totaling project. In this way, staging will be a previous design which guides the scenic work in a unifiying direction, so that all elements must subordinate themselves to this. The director assumes the staging as a composition in which all elements (objects, persons, languages) are related in a balanced ensemble[7].

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This theatre needed a new type of acting. Without an actor capable of eliminating the traces of the construction of representation, the illusion of reference to which playwright, director (and audience) aspire would fail. Szondi (1994) states that acting must affirm the absolute character of Drama. The relation between actor and character cannot be perceived. Instead, actor and character must fuse.

Definitely, the romantic actor (so-called *romantic diva*), which lived his glorious era in the late 19th century, was not this kind of actor.

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It was not easy to find a type of acting which adapted to those demands. The nature of acting as an event makes its subjection to the logic of strategic action improbable. In theatre, actor and spectator are inmersed in a context with a constant latent risk, which cannot be neutralized by previous planification. Therefore, this opacity of acting caused all kinds of censorship and reprimand throughout Western theatre history.

All attempts to erase the traces of construction in acting must try to reduce or control the nature of acting as an event, that is, intervene in the situational aspects of the acting phenomenon. Following Merleau Ponty (1975), we called "situation of acting" a spatial and temporal context in which the subject is immersed to carry out actions as an actor. Here, the actions carried out by the actor are indistinguishable from the actions in a real situation, but the difference lies in the fact that in the situation of acting, the actions are carried out only for being watched by another subject, the spectator. Thus, the spectator's gaze is what gives legitimacy to and supports the actor's performance. The actor performs simply because he is being watched by another subject and this is the only reason to stay on stage as an actor (Mauro, 2010). We consider that the situation of acting is the basis of the theatrical phenomenon, beyond the poetics, aesthetics, stylistics and ideological characteristics which each performance intends to have.

In the situation of acting, the actor can only assume a logic of tactic action, with which Michel De Certeau (2007) characterizes the "arts of doing". Unlike strategy, tactic is a logic of action of an agent who, unable to isolate or establish a place of distance, cannot circumscribe its own place, so

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it only has the place of the other. Thus, it entirely depends on the circumstances in which the precise instant of an intervention transforms a situation into a favourable situation (De Certeau, 2007). Tactic is a movement, so that it cannot exist in a position of retreat, distance and caution.

The artistic action of the actor is produced between a multitude of heterogeneous elements, among which the dramatic text and the director's instructions[8] may be mentioned, but also the present circumstances and the uncountable accidental events which may happen. It is impossible for the actor to make a synthesis of them in the way the playwright or director can (that is, establishing a *strategy*). The only possible synthesis is his concrete action, which is the possibility of situating himself and taking advantage of opportunities in an unpredictable and alien territory. Even if acting tried to organize itself as strategy, the action of the actor could only be produced as tactic. Through tactic, acting does not produce something planned, but depends on the opportunity. It is in the place of the other, full of elements and circumstances which cannot be dominated beforehand. Therefore, all attempts to make the scene self-sufficient or closed on itself necessarily imply a negation or indifference about situational aspects of the scene. This causes a reduction of the logic of tactic action inherent to acting in favor of previous planning. This is the (failed) aspiration of the realistic acting method.

The romantic actor shared with the popular actor[9] and the varieties artist his tendency to use the most assorted possibilities of exploitation of the situation of acting. The vocation of these artists consists in causing an immediate effect in the audience (pathetic, comical or surprising), through the ostentation of their presence and the direct communication with the spectator. This places the condition of actor over the character and collides with the aspirations of realism. This fact became evident with Chekov's dramaturgy, in mid-19th century.

Indeed, Chekov abandoned the artifice of the *personal encounter* (as the convention in which characters express their thoughts to each other), and opted for the vacuity of the dialogue. In this evasion of conflict, the subtext becomes more important as the basis of the illusion of reference. For this reason, the external and stereotyped forms of acting become

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unsustainable. The collision between realistic dramaturgy and romantic acting results in a total subordination of the actor to the general rhythm of the staging proposed by the director and, ultimately, in the attenuation of the actor's presence. To achieve this, it is necessary to form a new kind of actor. There will be two fundamental devices for doing it: the *fourth wall* and the *experiencing*.

Although the idea of a scene closed on itself can be found in Diderot and Stendhal[10], the notion of *fourth wall* has been attributed to André Antoine (1858-1943). In addition to a series of resources and procedures for producing realistic staging (by which he is known worldwide), Antoine also introduced innovations in acting. Although not an acting method, these innovations later influenced directors and acting teachers, such as Stanislavski.

Antoine eliminated the monologue in front of footlights (which he eliminated too). Instead, he promoted the movement of the actors across the stage, doing away with the requirement to stay in frontal position, which occasionally caused the actors to turn their backs on the audience. This detachment with respect to the spectator, in order to give the impression that the attention of the actor was only focused on the situation represented, created, at the same time, the illusion that the audience was witnessing an event which happened regardless of their presence. For that reason, the staging simulated that it did not consider their point of view. This was replicated at the verbal level: the lines overlapped each other as if they were not uttered to be understood by the spectator. In this way, the illusion of a *fourth wall* between actors and audience was created, although everything that happened on the stage was done according to the values, tastes and interests of the bourgeois spectator (including the expectation of illusion of reference).

In his renowned work in the Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) took the idea of *fourth wall* as one of the pillars of his *system*, a method to form actors and to produce performances. His objective was to distance new actors from the informal modes of training and to promote the education of acting as a rational form of transmitting knowledge. For that, he substituted the historical organization of the actors in troupes with the conformation of casts.

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First, while the troupe was commanded by the main figure, the cast is commanded by the director. Secondly, in a cast act, actors do not specialize in fixed and stereotyped roles, and characters are not distributed according to hierarchy, but according to verisimilitude (which depends on the dramatic text and the director's staging strategy). In the troupe, instead, the main figure could assume the lead role, although his or her appearance, age or gender did not match the character (for example, Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet). This destroyed every illusion of transparency, putting in the foreground the artificial relationship between actor and character.

Strictly, the objective of the Stanislavski's *system* was to achieve *organic acting*. That is, a performance in which every external sign correlates with a real feeling. Stanislavski starts from the assumption that a gifted or inspired actor achieves organic acting spontaneously. The *system* helps when that does not happen. Therefore, he states that the technique is an intermediary between that which is voluntary and involuntary.

The *system* proposes itself as a series of steps for the actor to understand the subtext of his character, and then implement the procedures for authentic *experiencing* accordingly. Indeed, the actor has to achieve a total analogy between his emotions and the emotions of the character (understood as a portion of sense emanating from the plot and affirmed by the staging).

Experiencing is the device that guarantees that each of the actor's actions and gestures matches an internal experience. This is the emotional basis which assures the quantity and quality of every external sign on stage. Just by experiencing a feeling which is adjusted to the subtext, the actor's actions and gestures will not be exaggerated or imperceptible, will not be confused or incongruous with the situation represented.

Thus, acting work is totally subsumed to the logic of strategic action, by which the playwright composes the dramatic text and the director arranges the scenic elements according to the sense he proposes to transmit. This subordination is clearly seen in the excessive importance that Stanislavski gives to the reading and understanding of the dramatic text by the actor, and the importance of the rehearsal.

Indeed, the rehearsal is the privileged instance in the realistic acting method, because it is the moment in which the acting performance adjusts

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to the staging program, even if the actor's discoveries can contribute to this plan. The rehearsal is unrelated to the basis of acting because it is previous and untimely with respect to the encounter between actor and spectator. In the rehearsal, the actor makes the experiencing of the character his own by using plenty of exercises and procedures, profusely described by Stanislavski, which do not differ between training and professional work: Sense Memory, Affective Memory, Magic If, etc. The objective is for the actor to internalize the model emanating from the plot and to have *experiencing* according to this; a process which once discovered could be voluntarily recreated on stage.

The results of the application of this *system* in Moscow Art Theatre promoted its recognition and worldwide dissemination. One of its main achievements was the conformation of homogeneous casts, without exceptionalities, that is, with a common tone among all the members. Continuity or rhythmic fluidity of the staging, without intensity excesses or interruptions, constitutes the principal formal characteristic of the realistic acting method. This completely fits the requirement of attenuation of the actor's presence.

The attenuation is obtained by reducing the situational aspects of acting, that is, closing the scene on itself and avoiding any transition to the audience. Thus, attenuation promotes deleting the work of representation, creating the illusion that the actor's experiencing does not have the spectator as addressee. We do not maintain that this type of theatre exists. Indeed, this ambition is always refuted by the scene. However, some acting and direction methods (such as the realistic method) do not take the situational aspects of the theatre into account, diminishing their importance. In this way, those methods avoid one of the basics of the theatrical phenomenon, forcing the actor to find personal solutions or those provided by the collective narrative of the actors, which paradoxically is highly devalued by the modern acting methods and theatrical aesthetics[11].

Independently of its aesthetic results and ideological premises, the dissemination of Stanislavski's *system* was a result of its capacity to conceptualize aspects of acting unmentioned until then and to turn the teaching and practice of acting into rational activities. Thus, the *system* created a specific vocabulary which permits the communication of the

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actors among themselves, and between actors and directors (and critics, researchers, and even the audience).

But which are the problems caused by the applications of this method? Which are the aspects that remain obscure or unresolved in it?

First, the *fourth wall* overlooks the situation of acting. From a historical perspective, the *fourth wall* is a reaction to the supremacy of the stereotyped and superficial acting of the Romanticism, so its main objective is to establish the spectator as a distraction and as the principal enemy of realistic acting. For a kind of theatre which looks to cause an illusion of reference, the *fourth wall* not only eliminates the distraction created by the audience but also closes the scene on itself, transforming it in a parallel world that follows a plan predetermined in the rehearsal.

But the theatrical phenomenon, even if strategically outlined by the staging, is a live event that happens in a spatial and temporal context which is unpredictable. The realistic acting method is thus circumscribed to the previous preparation of the character, which constitutes only part of what the actor does on stage. Certainly, in the situation of acting the actor not only experiences the character, but also positions himself in the light, adjusts the volume of his voice to be heard by the audience, resolves the contingencies that appear during the play without the audience noticing them, follows the spatial indications, connects with other actors reacting to these proposals and proposing at the same time, responds to what happens here and now, but considering the indications in the dramatic text too, adapting his reactions to the general plan, etc.

By overlooking the situational aspects of acting, the realistic acting method leaves the actor defenseless against the contingencies that could happen onstage. The total subordination to the logic of strategic action, that is, to repeat the plan predetermined in the rehearsal, even experiencing sincerely what was found in that process, isolates the actor from what happens onstage. Therefore, it reduces the actor's capacity to carry out actions tactically. As a consequence, the actor has only two choices: not to react to what happens here and now (producing a schematic performance or endangering the continuity of representation if something serious happens) or to abandon the realistic acting method and solve these problems employing personal solutions or procedures from other methods. In this

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sense, the realistic acting method would be an *impossible* method in scenic terms, or at least, a method not sufficient to perform onstage. This aspect, apparently obvious, is ignored by theatre studies, critics and actors' and directors' training institutions.

Another aspect that Stanislavski (and followers such as Strasberg) does not resolve is that of action[12]. Indeed, the *system* does not explain how the transformation of *experiencing* into action takes place. Stanislavski's premise is that external signs of behavior are motivated by feelings or emotions, so the *system* is only engaged in working with these. But, can the *experiencing* by itself guarantee that emotion is transformed into action and gestures, whether the actor performs alone or with another actor? How are external signs resolved? There is a notion related to Cartesian dualism implicit in the idea that the emotional work based on introspection simply could be *materialized* in the body, and that this materialization would be spontaneously appropriate in terms of intensity. The problem of action reveals the blind spot of Western theatre: the body.

By omitting the technical and methodological treatment of the body, the realistic acting method reproduces normative positions about it, which have been present in the Western theatre since the Greeks. These normative positions impose an intellectual and artificial conception of the body as a definitive unit, without risks. This pursues the realization of a productive and disciplined body, which follows three imperatives for the clarity of representation: having significance and being organic and balanced.

The conferral of significance to gestures and movements makes the characteristic transience and fluidity of the body turn into a static, predetermined and foreseeable order. As to being organic, this refers to the body in which each part is conveniently isolated for its respective function, which results in total coordination. Everything that is not adapted to that organization is considered a menace to order, which authorizes the repression of the unfruitful elements (Lyotard, 1981). Lastly, the body must be balanced too. Given the impossibility for the actor to generate a mathematical and geometrical body such as that of the ballet dancer, this is substituted by a harmless, foreseeable and compensated body (Kaplan, 2006). Therefore, the legitimization of any excess of the actor's body is the character, as part of the plot and the staging that balances all the elements.

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In this way, the austerity or the excess in the actor's expression will be accepted as long as they are suitable to the totality of the representation.

The realistic acting method generated its own clichés and stereotypes, which contradicts *experiencing* as the epitome of the sincerity of expression. The apparent absence of conventionalism and arbitrariness that is promoted by introspective work caused realistic acting to be associated with something "genuine", "true" or "authentic" (Naremore, 2015, p. 8). Conversely, other forms of acting, especially those to which realism opposed, were rejected by their artificiality and falseness. However, the removal of any traces of enunciation in realistic acting has not excluded the conventionalisms that any action made to be exhibited has. In this sense, realistic acting is both the external sign of an internal *experiencing* and the reverse: the induced search of an internal *experiencing* that justifies the gesture, expression or action which are necessary to follow the staging plan. Definitely, "weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping" (Brecht, 1964, p. 152).

Therefore, we come to a key point of our research: Which is the referent in realistic acting? Is it Reality? Is it the Dramatic text? Is it the feelings experienced by the actor? We can state that realistic acting consists in a long detour through which the actor externalizes an *experiencing* in accordance with the character, which in turn corresponds to the playwright's and the director's views of reality. Is this not as artificial as Romantic acting or *Commedia dell'Arte*?

Definitely, the elaboration of an acting method that did not interfere with the illusion of transparency proposed by realistic dramaturgy and staging is the adaptation to the idea of a social group about the function of art and theatre in society in a special period of history.

In the beginning of the 20th century this ideal had an effect on a new medium: cinema. Several researchers have stated that nothing in the *basic device* (Gaudreault, 2007) of reproduction of moving images indicated the production of fictions with actors as necessary. In this sense, the cinematograph could have evolved into other forms, as is demonstrated by the diverse experimental attempts in the first decades of the 20th century. In fact, first cinema, so-called *cinema of attractions*, did not have the linguistic rudiments that would converge in the narrative continuity that prevailed around 1915.

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The first movies had the characteristics of a *filmed theatre*: a camera placed at the height of the human eye, without movements, in front of a scene played without temporal interruptions or cuts. The only demand for the actor was not to stay immobile during the shot or make conventional gestures that resembled a mime artist.

Actors that performed in these movies were not theatre actors, because cinema was a disreputable art form. For that reason, the first actors of cinema were artists of variety. But there was another reason why the actors of erudite theatre were not suitable for early cinema: their insufficient adaptability to use their bodies in a non-conventional form. The actor of declamation, or *romantic diva*, based his performance on the possibilities in the use of the voice. So, the movements and gestures had to be solemn and rigid, and they only searched to express excessive emotions[13]. This kind of performance was useless for cinema of attractions, which was exhibited for a popular audience in the middle of a spectacle where cinema was one more element among other performative numbers.

However, if cinema had remained a cheap form of entertainment its future would have been uncertain. The initial novelty, which stimulated the interest of the audience for the device itself, was followed by a series of attempts to turn cinema into an autonomous show. To that end it was necessary to capture the bourgeoisie, opening picture theatres (which emulated the structure and design of theatres), and resorting to the habits and tastes of that audience.

Thus, Le Film d'Art company was created in 1908. It aimed to produce films based on screenplays by contemporary authors and playwrights, and performed by famous theatre actors. Its first film, *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise* (L'assassinat du duc de Guise, André Calmettes, Charles Le Bargy, 1908), had great success and attracted the high society of Paris (Pinel, 2009). Subsequently, Le Film d'Art sought the prestige of the actors of *Comédie Française* and associated with it. Although the solemnity of those actors did not produce the expected good results, the initiative was imitated by other undertakings, as the Société Cinématographique des Auteurs et Gens de Lettres (SCAGL), which employed André Antoine and some of his disciples, and the Série d'Art Pathé-Frères, which had subsidiaries throughout Europe. With the formula *Famous Players in Famous Plays* (later adopted by

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Adolf Zukor in the USA), cinema definitely abandoned the category of funfair show and finally attracted the middle and upper classes.

Although art cinema did not introduce aesthetic innovations, because it kept the traditional conception of *filmed theatre*, we consider that it contributed to the commercial (and later industrial) viability of the new medium, since it provided cinema with the access of the bourgeois audience. This would not have been possible without the definite approach of cinema to the expectations of that audience. Those expectations were connected to the narration of a story with recognizable references. Therefore, the utilization of famous actors offered one of the essential elements for that audience: a focus of narrative interest, that is, the possibility to follow and identify with a character.

If in the beginning this implied the utilization of prestigious theatre actors, afterwards this commercial strategy had aesthetic implications and the language of cinema was organized according to narrative rules, achieving continuity. Indeed, in the attempt to give a diegetic basis to every image (and later, every sound) present in the film, cinema was organized into a realistic-illusionist narrative anchored to temporal-spatial verisimilitude and psychologically motivated characters (Elsaesser, 2011).

This linear narrative, causally motivated and focalized on a character, was organized according to a series of shots, positions and movements of the camera which fragmented actors' action and bodies, to be reconstructed in film editing. With the objective to immerse the spectators in drama, the cinematographic space closed itself on a fragmented dialogue and was organized into a swing of *shot/reverse shot*, which Pascal Bonitzer (2007) identifies as a realistic and flat space.

As well as promoting a series of aesthetic modifications in the art of acting, such as the possibility of performing outdoors and in real locations or of seeing his own performance and correcting it (Lenk, 1994), cinema began to require a new type of actor whose performance would adapt to fragmentation. In this sense, the demand for precision and gesture attenuation is not based on respect for the referent, but on the need for the actor's presence not to break the illusion of reference produced by the continuity of the narrative. Once again, *normalization*, that is, the elimination or erasure of any disruptions, imposed a kind of performance

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on the actors. Thus, we can see how the choice of the bourgeois spectator for the cinema resulted, as in the case of theatre, in the adoption of realism and the attenuation of the actor's presence.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed the realistic acting method as a device of attenuation of the actor's presence.

With this aim, it is necessary to distinguish three ways of understanding realism: as a mode of construction of statements, as a sense effect and as a specific method of producing realistic acting. All these forms are comprehensible only if they are analyzed from a historical perspective. Certainly, both the mode of construction of realistic statements in theatre (dramatic texts or staging) and the realistic acting method associated with it were conceived in a specific era and as a reaction to the context. Only this type of analysis allows us to understand and explain the illusion of reference produced by the realistic forms, which cannot be considered universal.

In these terms, we have analyzed realism as an expression of a social class, the bourgeoisie, and of its conception of the function of art in society. Its aspiration to watch its debates, conflicts and interests reflected, and to universalize them by means of tutoring sense, is in the basis of the *normalization* of the scenic and cinematographic components, among which the actor's presence is revealed as an essential element and, at the same time, as the most reluctant.

Notes

[1] The nature of acting as an event comes from its quality as a phenomenon which takes place in an immanent and indeterminate spatial and temporal context. As to the nature of acting as exhibition, we consider that the basis of acting (and theatre itself) resides in the encounter between actor and spectator, in which the former stays and/or performs actions on stage with the only objective to be watched by the latter. Thus, the gaze is the only thing that legitimates and gives sense to the actor's work. For this reason, no other element (dramatic text, direction, etc.) could argue to be the justification for that relationship. We name this essential encounter *situation of acting* (see Mauro, 2011b; 2010).

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2   Following Louis Marin, Roger Chartier (1996) distinguishes two dimensions of the notion of representation: transitive and reflexive. Transitive representation constitutes the substitution of an absence by an object, image or new element that becomes transparent toward the referent. Reflexive representation, instead, consists in the self-representation of the new element and the showing of its presence. Hence, referent and sign are the same thing. Transitive representation prevailed in traditional Western theatre, conceived as an idea or sense that is absent and is replaced on and through the stage (see Mauro, 2011a).

3   François Lyotard (1970) claims that every statement has an opacity that cannot be translated into meaning and that, therefore, persists as a figure.

4   These comments are not only valid for realistic theatre, but also for the so-called *postdramatic theatre*, which we have characterized as *directorial practice* (Mauro, 2013a).

5   *Italian neorealism* is an emblematic case, because it is well known by the sense effects (reflected in its own name). However, its most famous actors did not use any kind of realistic acting method. For example, we should mention the case of Anna Magnani, accurately analyzed by Carmicé Mur (2015).

6   That implied the elimination of verse, of the arbitrariness in the facts and of the too long speeches that hindered interaction.

7   These characteristics are common to all kinds of direction, not only in realistic theatre. On how this develops in the so-called *postdramatic theater*, see Mauro (2013a).

8   By director's instructions we understand not only the traditional staging planification of a realistic play (although this is the issue of this paper). In fact, various contemporary aesthetic proposals which reject realism implicitly or explicitly maintain the supreme importance of scenic direction, no longer as guarantor of the sense emanating of the dramatic text, but as organizer of the diverse scenic languages or the *found objects* discovered by the actor in the rehearsal. As an example, we can mention *Postdramatic Theatre* and the Argentinean *Teatro de Intensidades* (Intensity Theatre). (See Mauro, 2013a; 2011b).

9   About the *popular actor* concept, see Mauro (2013b).

10 Diderot, *Discurso sobre la poesía dramática*, 1758; Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare*, 1823-1825.

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[11] About the imaginary of the actors as collective narrative, see Mauro (2014b).

[12] Although Stanislavski later reconsidered his hypothesis and proposed his *Method of Physical Actions*, its worldwide dissemination and implementation were not as significant as what is known as the first part or the *system*.

[13] As an example, see photographs or filmed performances of Sarah Bernhardt. There is an interesting paper about the relationship between divas of the Italian silent cinema and the forms of the hysterical attack (Torello, 2006).

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