

The use of image schemata in psychophysical actor training

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Abstract. This paper will discuss an approach which uses the theory of the Image Schemata as a theoretical underpinning for the use of yoga in actor training. According to Mark Johnson, Image Schemata are pre-linguistic configurations, which structur[e] particular experiences schematically, so as to give order and connectedness to our perceptions and conceptions (1987: 75). Johnson identifies a number of Image Schemata, such as Verticality, Balance, Force, Container and Path as well as orientational structures such as In-Out, Front-Back, and Up-Down. Johnson demonstrates the way the aforementioned structures underlie our embodied experience of daily activities and he further examines their presence in the use of language and the development of metaphorical thinking.

Based on Johnsons description, I would argue that yoga poses offer clear-cut shapes in which Image Schemata operate. Furthermore, Image Schemata are explicitly present in the strong emphasis on directionality that characterizes the practice of yoga poses as well as the vocabulary that comprises the verbal instructions. For example in balancing standing pose Vrksasana (See Figure 1), the basic Up - Down schema can be traced in the vertical lift of the arms as well as in the action of the standing leg. Moreover, the pose is taught through instructions, such as lift the arms up and press the foot down, that invite the practitioner to assume the shape and actively engage with these actions. The interplay between up and down also features in additional instructions that address smaller parts of the body, for example draw the inner thigh up and extend the base of the neck down.

It could be argued therefore that the Up - Down Image Schema informs the relationship between the pose and the surrounding space and also underlies the micro-movements that enable an in-depth and detailed embodiment of the pose. Correspondingly, the pose could be seen as a psychophysical structure that exemplifies the way the Schema emerges through spatial and anatomical relationships. It could thus be argued that the practice of yoga can develop the practitioners awareness of these deeply embedded structures which, according to Johnson, inform ones abstract and metaphorical thinking.

On the basis, therefore, of the role of the Image Schemata as an underlying and connective structure of physical, cognitive and linguistic functions as well as their explicit presence in yoga positions and verbal instructions, I will argue that Image Schemata can render a theatrical application of yoga effective and methodical. Drawing on a practical project that explored the use of yoga in S Becketts Rockaby, this paper will demonstrate the ways in which Image Schemata can furnish a psychophysical approach to textual analysis and character creation with an interpretative and methodological framework. Finally, this paper will address the criticisms (Clark 2008; Sheets Johnstone 2009; Shina & Lopez 2000) that the theory has attracted

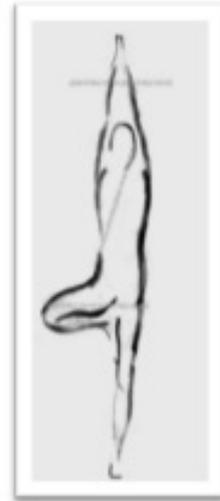


Figure 1. Vrksasana

and argue that an applied and practical exploration can offer an embodied understanding of the theory and a more accurate description of its function.

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