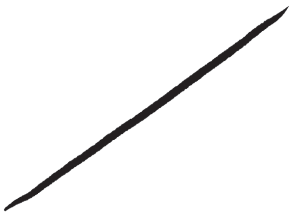


# **COMMUNICATION, TRUST AND IMAGINATION. WAYS TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIRECTOR AND ACTOR**

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**Abstract:** Imagination is the essence of creativity in both theatre and film, but it manifests itself differently in these two arts. In theatre, the audience actively participates in creating the world of the play. The stage is a canvas where imagination fills in the gaps. Cinema, on the other hand, often strives for hyperrealism. The camera captures actual locations, detailed sets, and authentic environments. The space becomes an integral part of storytelling. The cinema screen is perceived as a window through which the audience has access to a real world that is not limited to what is seen in the frame – it continues to exist beyond what is accessible. Imagination not only shapes our perception and reactions in everyday life but is also the driving force behind acting and directing. Furthermore, the viewer’s perception is inherently subjective, making this subjectivity a part of the creative process. Thus, the means of communication become the essence, creating distinct relationships and communication bridges. In the crews of both film and theatre, the most important and challenging relationship is probably the one between director and actor. This collaboration is based on mutual trust, imagination, empathy, and openness. The authenticity of the performance and the ability to reveal the depth of the character are essential, with the actor’s mental processes playing a crucial role in achieving this goal – primarily under the director’s guidance. Throughout this essay, I explore this relationship.

**Keywords:** director-actor relationship, cinema, trust, communication, process and result, imagination.

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## **Introduction**

The director’s work with the actor can be considered a definition of communication. At the same time, it is a definition that is impossible to put into words. There are as many styles of working as there are directors in the world. For those that require almost total improvisation and those who are polar opposites, insisting on the repetition of exact actions to the point of mechanisation. Between these two extremes, between the black and the white of working techniques, there are many shades of grey. Both the actor and the director have to give each other space to express their creative spirit, but the actor’s contribution in this respect is influenced (or maybe even restrained) by the personality of the director he is “facing”.

In acting, the concept of “being” refers to fully inhabiting the character’s present state—their emotions, thoughts, and physicality. The actor becomes the character, living in the moment of the play or scene. However, in his work *Introducere în Teoria Valorilor / Introduction to the Theory of Values*, Tudor Vianu presents the argument that an observer is necessary, as it is not possible for

a subject to observe themselves during the act of working: “Acts cannot be described because only what can be observed can be described” (Vianu, 1942, p. 18) [my translation].

The observer, this being only one of its myriad roles, is the director. What is very important is not how and what the actors carry out, but the significant aspects that happen to them during the act of performance. And what happens to the actor, the mental states in which he is brought into, are managed by the director. Ion Cojar said that the difference between something essential happening or not happening to him lies in the distinction between truth and falsehood, between the authenticity and artificiality of the act of interpretation. (Cojar, 2017, p. 40). Directors relate differently to the actors they work with, and the “technique” of working often comes, for the most part, from the director. So, the same actor, in the hands of two different directors, may perform once authentically and once artificially.

The way the scene or sequence is led can also depend to a large extent on the actor, whether well-established or not, or, more importantly, whether he or she is in contact with a first-time director. It is possible for an actor to be inhibited by a director, just as a director can be intimidated by an actor. It is essential that the director knows what he wants and knows what to ask in his work with the performer.

I consider a director’s relationship with an actor intimate and personal, and because of that, it cannot always be theorized. An actor’s primary responsibility is to create a living character who feels and breathes like a human being. Professor Ion Cojar notes in his book *Poetics of the Actor’s Art*:

The spiritual phenomena cannot be known in their essence except through own experimentation. [...] the discovery of other identities or human structures, which they [the actors] are called upon to undertake and embody are not achieved except, paradoxically, through their own individuality, through their own psychosomatic ‘totality’, through their own identity. (Cojar, 2017, p. 53)

The primary task of a director is to know their character better than they know themselves (self-ignorance being a human trait, an obvious stage in the life of every individual). Knowledge comes with imagination. If we take Konstantin Stanislavski’s words and replace “actor” with “director”, we get the same meaning with the same importance: “The imagination takes the initiative in the creative process, drawing the actor along behind it” (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 63).

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### ***Trust and communication***

Acting and directing are two professions with distinct responsibilities. The actor is the responsibility of the director. The latter is the one who sees, and the former is the one who is seen, exposed, and vulnerable. It is important that the actor allow himself to be seen without being seen by himself, and this comes with complete trust in the person who chooses to “see” him.

Given that the actor is the director’s way of expressing the idea directly – the medium and the “means” the director uses to put what he or she is thinking on stage and in frame – it is vital that the two are in full comprehension. To get a better sense of the relationship between the two, Ken Dancyger, in *The Director’s Idea*, uses a simple analogy: the relationship between a therapist and his patient (Dancyger, 2006, p. 105). He does not refer to this as a relationship in which one confesses to the other, but rather a creative relationship. To better understand what is meant by the creative relationship between therapist and patient – and thus between director and actor – the theorist says that when therapist and patient work and understand each other very well, a new, improved human is born. Similarly, the director and the actor create a being that is transposed in the film: the character. Thus, a new way of communicating emerges from the abilities and desires of the two.

Robert Bresson says of actors that they are “Models. Letting themselves be led not by you, but by the words and gestures you make them say and do” (Bresson, 1977, p. 31). All the characters have defining and unique qualities not only physically but also behaviourally. Beyond these qualities or characteristics, we capture the core of a character deep within their psyche. It is the core on which the foundations of the narrative depend, because based on the character’s core, a mixture of desires and inhibitions develop, which further lead to the narrative being exposed. This core – a kind of lava within the character (Dancyger, 2006, p. 109) – is what makes it pulse with life and credibility. It is very important for the director, together with the actor, to draw up a diagram of the character, of its development, in order to guide the director throughout the film. A main character must have the ability to transform over the course of the script, and this transformation must be one that is grounded in reality and which the audience can feel and experience.

To ensure the success of the film, it is crucial that there is a foundation of trust in the relationship between the director and the actor. There are many different kinds of actor reactions. There are those who show trust without waiting for the director to demonstrate his ability to choose and take action, and there are actors who need to be shown that their trust is deserved. Experienced actors, or

simply those who are very determined, may need time to decide if they can entrust themselves to the director's intuition, intelligence, and knowledge. If the director can't tell right from wrong, if he doesn't understand his story and his characters, if he doesn't know them well enough, then the actor will withdraw from the director-actor relationship and start monitoring his own performance, thus hurting the play or the film (Weston, 1996). The actor will be doing someone else's work, and his attention will no longer be fully focused on what he actually has to do. He will act like a director who also produces his film, for example. This kind of distribution of attention and energy involves compromises that harm the project.

Professor Ion Cojar argues that the most important criteria for the approval of acting creation must be the authenticity of the psychological processes that take place in the actor during the act of performance. Therefore, the main criteria for evaluating the qualities of a director, from the actor's perspective, is his ability to detect and stimulate authenticity, to see it in the actor in front of him, and to decide for him whether or not what he is doing is beneficial to the character. The actor's performance must be carefully observed by the director so that the character created in his mind and then put into the script corresponds to the one seen in the actor.

The philosophy of acting originated more in theatre than in film or other media. Ideas about acting and performance were revolutionised by the Russian theorist Konstantin Stanislavski. Britain, France, and the USA got hold of these ideas, and they adapted them to their liking, to their needs. The ideas have their roots in the 19th and 20th centuries, when studies of human behaviour and cognitive functions were in vogue and psychologists, through psychology and psychoanalysis, were trying to unravel these layers and underpinnings of human behaviour. These ideas very quickly found their way into literature or into the visual arts, design, and theatre.

Stanislavski felt that acting should hide or reveal universally valid truths: the human spirit or nature, and, above all, truth. For him, truth means three things:

1. Verisimilitude – correspondence to what we can observe in the world around us – the external world;
2. Coherence – the internal consistency and believability of a character's thoughts, emotions, and actions within a performance.
3. The spiritual meaning of life – tangible things coexisting with non-palpable things in a universe where reality and spirituality complement each other.

All three of these together work in a symbiotic manner and give the actor the opportunity to bring what we call the character of the play or film to the

stage/screen. Stanislavski asserts that truth on stage does not mean to act as you are in reality and to expose yourself as a person on stage. If that were the case, the theorist argues, then truth rendered in this way in a film or on stage would be pure vulgarity. The same difference exists between what is artistic and what lacks artistic value as between a painting and a photograph: the photograph reproduces everything, while the painting captures only what is essential (Stanislavsky, 1968).

The inner and outer conflicts of the characters became a point of interest for playwrights and screenwriters, and subsequently, for directors. And for the playwright, as well as for the director, the instrument that could illustrate the aforementioned conflict was the actor. How to bring him into a state of actuality, of immediacy, remains the point of focus in terms of acting.

The theatre is perhaps one of the most difficult arts, for three connections must be accomplished simultaneously and in perfect harmony: links between the actor and his inner life, his partners and the audience. [...] So one is permanently forced to struggle to discover and maintain this triple relationship; to one's self, to the other and to the audience. (Brook, 1995, pp. 37-40)

In theatre, but also in film, a performance is about human communication, conveying to an audience the content of communication between characters. In film, there is another medium of communication, because what is transmitted to the audience, the final artistic object, is itself the result of communication between the actors and the camera. The camera is not just an instrument used to record a reality; it becomes an active participant. The three-way relationship that theatre director Peter Brook talks about in the above paragraph also applies to film, with the camera taking the place of the audience. Thus, the actor must be in a permanent relationship with him or herself, the acting partner, and the camera. The latter embodies the personality of the director, but also that of the cinematographer, and is a genuine communication partner of the actor in front of it.

Professor Mihai Dinu, in his work *Comunicarea. Repere fundamentale*, writes:

Experiencing a spectacular rise in popularity, both in everyday language and in the terminology of increasingly diverse fields of social sciences and beyond, the concept of communication is confusing because of its many hypostases and tends to be a permanent source of confusion and controversy. (2007, p. 17) [my translation]

All the definitions of human communication, regardless of the schools of thought to which they belong or the orientations to which they subscribe, have at least the following elements in common: communication is the process of transmitting

information, ideas, opinions, either from one individual to another or from one group to another; no kind of activity, from the banal activities of the daily routine that each of us lives to the complex activities carried out at the level of organisations, societies, cultures, cannot be conceived outside the process of communication.

***Imagination – how we operate it and how it influences us***

In the theatre, the imagination fills the space, whereas the cinema screen represents the whole, demanding that everything in the frame be linked in a logically coherent manner. (Brook, 1995, p. 32)

In everyday life, imagination plays a very important role. The psychoanalyst Alfred Adler uses the following example: if a snake approaches my leg, or if I just think it is approaching, the effect for me will be the same, regardless of the actual truth value of what I think. Basically, what determines our reaction is not the event itself, but rather our perception of it, what we imagine the event might actually be.

With cinema, because of the realistic nature of photography, a person is always in a context, never a person outside a context [...] If one considers the thousands of great films that have been made, one can see that the strength of cinema lies in photography, and photography involves somebody being somewhere [...] It imposes a certain everyday realism in which the actor inhabits the same world as the camera. (Brook, 1995, p. 31)

In cinema, for the viewer, the space in which the action takes place has a very high truth value compared to theatre. The cinema screen is perceived as a window through which the audience has access to a real world, which continues to exist beyond what is accessible, says André Bazin in – What is Cinema? – (Bazin, 2014, p. 106)

Empathy is what enables us to understand and share the feelings of others. The mere change of where we are causes a change in our role, notes Alex F. Osborn in “Applied Imagination”. “A change of place may change the emotional setting.” (Osborn, 1953, p. 253)

The types of imagination noted by Osborn are as follows:

1. Visual imagination, the faculty of seeing with the mind’s eye. (Fosdick Harry)

2. Speculative imagination, in which memory does not play a very important role.
3. Reproductive imagination, which considers the past – reconstructs.
4. Structural visualisation, the ability to compose, to create starting from a drawing.
5. Substitutive imagination. The ability to feel in someone else's place. This is the actor's secret – to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the main task of a director is to know his character better than himself. And knowledge comes together with imagination. “The imagination takes the initiative in the creative process, drawing the actor along behind it”, wrote Stanislavski. He also finds several types of imagination and notes them as follows:

There is imagination, the kind of imagination which takes the initiative, which works on its own. It develops on its own, without special effort. It works constantly, tirelessly, waking or sleeping. There is also the kind of imagination which lacks initiative but which readily accepts anything suggested to it and then develops it independently. That kind of imagination is comparatively easy to develop. However, if the imagination just accepts what has been suggested to it, and doesn't develop it, then there are problems. There are people who neither create on their own nor accept what is given them. If they can only latch onto the externals of what has been demonstrated to them, they have no imagination and without imagination you cannot be an actor. (Stanislavski, 2013, p. 49)

While a director needs to have imagination and initiative in order to create, the actor is not constrained by this.

Without imagination, there is no creation, artistic or scientific, and imagination can create anything. Professor Ion Cojar says that everything that mankind has created over the years has been imagination first, and our behaviour is an expression of the image we have of ourselves.

### ***The psychological halo effect***

If we refer to people, the halo effect involves a generalisation of a person's appreciation based on a particular trait. If we say about a person that they are good or bad in a certain respect, we will tend to evaluate them similarly in other respects. “Most social acts have to be understood in their setting, and lose meaning if isolated. No error in thinking about social facts is more serious than the failure to see their place and function.” (Asch, 1987, p. 61)

In one of his experiments, psychologist Solomon Asch exposed the traits of two imaginary people, called A and B, and asked participants for their impressions of their personalities. They were described as follows:

A: intelligent – industrious – impulsive – critical – stubborn – envious

B: envious – stubborn – critical – impulsive – industrious – intelligent

The vast majority of participants thought more highly of person A, although, as we can see, the two have the same traits, but in a different order. According to the halo effect, the first attributes influence the perception of the others, and thus of the individual.

The halo effect is also present in the world of actors, affecting them on two levels. First of all, the significance of the roles an actor has played throughout his or her career is of great importance, because these will have a halo effect on the roles to come. If an actor has had one or more praiseworthy roles, this impression will be reflected in future performances, which will also be perceived as good.

Talent, hard work and technique are needed for a great performance. But at the same time, other factors that are not related to an actor's skills must be fulfilled. In fact, a law of "regression toward the mean"<sup>1</sup> (Kahneman, 2012, p. 281) tells us that, most probably, after a great success, based also on luck, a failure follows.

Beyond an actor's social image, the halo effect also spills over into the actor's work for a role. When he or she embodies a character, the actor carries, whether he or she wants to or not, a public image and also those of the characters he or she has embodied before, notes theatre critic George Banu in his book on theatre memory. The presence of these past roles in the public's memory distorts the actor's expression, regardless of their will.

It is also important for the actors to be aware that certain traits of their character – traits acquired by the character in the course of the film through the halo effect – are still reflected in all the gestures the character will make. Certain traits, however, are stronger than others and the order of their occurrence is very important.

Alfred Hitchcock, in defining the Kuleshov effect, used the following example:

For example, if Mr. Stewart is looking out into a courtyard and – let's say – he sees a woman with a child in her arms. Well, the first cut is Mr. Stewart, then what he sees, and then his reaction. We'll see him

1 In statistics, "regression toward the mean" is the phenomenon where if one sample of a random variable is extreme, the next sampling of the same random variable is likely to be closer to its mean. Furthermore, when many random variables are sampled and the most extreme results are intentionally picked out, it refers to the fact that (in many cases) a second sampling of these picked-out variables will result in "less extreme" results, closer to the initial mean of all the variables.

smile. Now if you took away the center piece of film and substituted – we’ll say – a shot of the girl Miss Torso in a bikini, instead of being a benevolent gentleman he’s now a dirty old man. And you’ve only changed one piece of film, you haven’t changed his look or his reaction.<sup>2</sup> (Naremore, 1988, p. 240)

We understand that a gesture shown at the beginning – a smile in the example given – will become a defining trait of the character and will thus be interpreted throughout the film. Only a gesture with the same impact could change the image that was initially created.

### ***The process, more important than the result***

In my third year of undergraduate studies, while I was a film directing student at UNATC, I had to choose between the two formats – digital or film – for my final exam film. I didn’t choose the one that would have given me a simpler and more “qualitative” result from a visual point of view, as some teachers tried to convince me – digital – but I chose the medium with a more complex and difficult process in all aspects – film. When you’re in the process of learning, without a doubt, the really important thing will be the path to the result and not the result itself. Film not only requires carefully done rehearsals before shooting, it also increases the attention of the whole team and forces the director, even the cinematographer, to carefully prepare the film from the writing process. The limited number of takes means you leave nothing to chance. Digital is easier to control (or has a higher percentage of control) than film, which, especially for a student, is a medium full of surprises that keeps you gripped and tense. I spent more than two months (which was half the time I had to make the film) trying to convince the cinematographer to shoot the night sequences on film (half the footage was already shot on 16mm black and white). But the process was too complicated, he said. After a long period of unsuccessful discussions, I chose to change the cinematographer, not the medium. I chose the process, not the result.

In her book *Directing Actors*, Judith Weston talks about the danger of “result-oriented directing” as opposed to “process-oriented directing” (Weston, 1996).

In result-oriented directing, the directors form an exact picture of the characters in their mind, the emotions, feelings and changes they will go through, with all the causality of this process. So, the method of working with the actors will consist of asking them to perform a character already created in its entirety,

<sup>2</sup> The example refers to the actor James Stewart and the character Miss Torso, played by Georgine Darcy, in the film *Rear Window* (director Alfred Hitchcock, 1954).

without giving freedom of interpretation, analysis, or change. Thus, the directors ask and the actors deliver what is asked of them. The value of the one who interprets consists, to a large extent, in their ability to imitate, and not in the ability to think for themselves.

When the actor is given precise directions and is presented with a character that is already shaped, even brought to ‘maturity’ by the director, they will become more or less ‘self-aware’. They will be very careful with their movements, with the director’s voice echoing in their head, and they will no longer be able to hear their character’s voice. The chances of feeling are reduced, leading only to execution.

Mark Travis, the renowned directing consultant, says in his book *Directing Features Films* that emotions are born in the actor as a consequence of the character’s circumstances, which the actor has assumed. These emotions, of the actor-character, come from his past, his desires, his expectations, his obstacles. The actor cannot mimic emotions. However, the director can try to create circumstances which, once assumed by the actor, can create in him the desired emotions.

Result-oriented directing can also be one of the causes of imbalance in the director-actor relationship. The actor, trying and failing to perform certain feelings without feeling them, accepts them as a failure, which in turn brings frustration. The director, who notices this inability to exactly reproduce the character from their mind, will either consider the actor incapable of fulfilling the role as intended, or will consider themselves, as the director, unconvincing. The director’s main objective in working with the actor should be to produce the actualization, the materialisation of a fictional character in the actor, who thus becomes alive. In this respect, professor Ion Cojar writes:

Thus, that which is of the highest degree of interest is not what the actor ‘does’, their exterior actions, but that which could result from the ensemble of their acts, namely that if while they act, while they play the part, authentic psychic phenomena occur to them, to extents capable of activating their intuition, the subconscious, their whole potentiality of awareness, capable of putting in motion functional modifications in their whole human globality, in their metabolism, hemostasis, cardiac rhythm, to provoke a disorder on a cellular level and in hormonal exchange etc., to change the whole kinesthesia and therefore to change their behaviour and thereby to constitute itself in an unexpected and unique life experience, in order to be left with an important benefit of knowledge, not just of their own person, but of all those taking part in this ‘miracle’. [...] That which they ‘do’ can be programmed, thought

in advance, planned, rationalised, speculated and ordained at will. That which is actually happening to them in the stage act cannot be foreseen, the psychic events cannot be pre-established. (2017, p. 160)

The fundamental concern of the director, in terms of working with the actor, should be to prepare the favourable conditions capable of giving birth to the processes that will transpose the actor into the character, changing their entire being, metamorphosing them.

### **Conclusions**

In the making of the film *The Limits of Control* (2009), Jim Jarmusch tells us that “There are only so many stories you can tell, but there are only so many ways to tell the same story.”

One of the conclusions of my essay is that the relationship between director and actor is challenging and is fundamental to the success of film or theatre work. This collaboration is based on mutual trust and effective communication, allowing the actor to become the channel through which the director conveys his artistic vision. The authenticity of the performance and the ability to reveal the truth of the character are essential, and the actor’s mental processes play a crucial role in achieving this goal.

“To create is not to deform or invent persons and things. It is to tie new relationships between persons and things which are, and as they are” (Bresson, 1977, p. 7). We understand that the main driving force of a film’s operation is given by the director-actor relationship (or director-subject, in the case of the documentary film), and both bring unique approaches that must be tailored to the most suitable framework for the project they are participating in. Therefore, trust is one of the essential elements of their work together and along with it, as we have stated in the text, come imagination, dedication, and good knowledge of the characters and their actions.

Imagination is the essence of creativity in both theatre and film, but it manifests itself differently in the two mediums. In theatre, imagination fills in the gaps and creates worlds, whereas in cinema, the visual reality of the screen provides a window into a world perceived as real. Imagination not only shapes our perception and reactions in everyday life, it is also the driving force behind acting and directing. The types of imagination described by Osborn and Stanislavski highlight the diversity and complexity of this mental process. Finally, imagination is presented as a powerful tool that enables actors and directors to create and innovate, transforming ideas into tangible realities that influence and enrich human experience.

Furthermore, the viewer's perception is subjective in nature, so this subjectivity also becomes part of the creative process. Discussing the halo effect, we understand that it is the tendency to generalise the evaluation of a person based on a single trait, which can influence both the social image of actors and their artistic interpretation. Solomon Asch's experiments and the example of Alfred Hitchcock illustrate how the order of presentation of traits and the context in which gestures are perceived can distort or reinforce the perception of a character. Thus, the halo effect plays a significant role in an actor's life, affecting not only how actors are seen offstage, but also the interpretation of the characters they embody, highlighting the importance of awareness of this phenomenon in order to maintain authenticity and artistic integrity.

The importance of the creative process in directing and acting is also highlighted, in contrast to the strictly result-oriented approach. Choosing film over digital represents a preference for authenticity and challenge, which fosters the development of skills and the deepening of the cinematic art. This choice symbolizes a commitment to the craft of filmmaking, embracing the unique qualities and constraints of film that can push artists to refine their techniques and express their vision in a way that digital formats may not always allow. It's a nod to the traditional methods of cinema, offering a distinct aesthetic and a more hands-on approach to the creative process. In conclusion, I find it important to approach directing in a way that values authentic human experience and facilitates deep collaboration between director and actor so that a vivid and compelling performance is born.

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