

KINESTHETIC IMAGINING



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Summary

This article addresses the problem of embodiment in terms of the objectified body, the mute body, and meaningless action and seeks to restore a language of embodiment and an embodied language in terms of the conscious body, action language, and action hermeneutics.

As a psychologist with a lifelong involvement in dance, I developed a keen interest in the split between thinking and movement in our culture as well as in the problem of embodiment. By embodiment, I mean both thoughtful action and embodied thinking. Dance training taught me to understand the imagination as moving through the body—the body that weeps, jumps for joy, and collapses in despair. Years of working as a dance therapist with schizophrenic patients showed me how to use movement to work with the terror and rage locked inside mute people. However, when I went from dance to psychology, I found there a view of the imagination as a thought or a visual image and a view that thinking about embodiment was the same as being embodied. My work, therefore, was to find words to describe an embodied imagination, to investigate relevant literature from the psychological tradition, and to collect descriptions from people who were movers.

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"In the beginning was the Word." For God, for Freud, and for much of Western civilization, tradition began in the written or spoken word. Lost was the tradition that in the beginning was music and rhythm, the songs mothers sang to their babies, the rocking and rhythmic noises of the young ones, dances celebrating the motion of planting seeds in the earth, villagers building barns together, the pattern of the stars circling around orbits, of molecules colliding and combining.

We are all molecules in motion, turning and changing. We are all matter, water, flowing in cycles. The common element is movement, all life in moving patterns of process and presence. "In the beginning was the Word" removes us from our natural affinity with the elements, the stars, and other animals.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is our alienation, from this matter, from what matters. We have lost our place in the universe, we are not at home.

We see this problem in the consulting room. We see it in the bodies of technocrats who sit in boxes, cars, move in straight lines, pump machines on exercise lines; body has become function, it has lost its expressive possibilities. There is a split between psyche and soma, resulting in manic acting out, psychosomatic symptoms, pervasive stress. These bodies are objects to be manipulated, what I call the *objectified body*.

We see this problem in our patients whose bodies register traumas and fears. A patient of mine had a symptom of constriction in her throat. When we let this body part speak, images and memories of sexual abuse returned. Then she found the words, connected the words to others, told other family members, confronted her father; the body part unlocked a world and a story. These frozen bodies are what I call *mute bodies*.

We see this problem in a story of psyche that has become internalized. Patients come to the office, furrow their brows and scrutinize their inner landscapes, losing connection with the everyday world, with nature, and with culture. They think their text comprises only their dreams or their spoken words, not understanding that their text is the world of action and connection. On the basis of a Romantic dualism between thinking and action, they turn away from the world of action to reflect. They lose the ability

to think on their feet, to reflect and find meaning while staying immersed in the stream of human action. Meaning is separated from the body in what I call the *meaningless body*.

KINESTHETIC IMAGINING

Theoretically, the objectified body can be understood as body without consciousness. As an object, this body is understood to respond passively to external forces impinging on it; there is a separation of external from internal body. Recovery of the relationship between external and internal, or the visible and the invisible, in Merleau-Ponty's words (1964, pp. 159-190), is the first step toward a recovery of the conscious body. This conscious body is what I call the *lived body*.

Merleau-Ponty describes the problem as a separation between consciousness as invisible interior and the body as visible exterior, and the resolution as beginning with the reinsertion of perception in the body: "The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 188).

Next, Merleau-Ponty reconnects imagination to body: "Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Thus there appears a 'visible' of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 164).

An image is not a thing but a way of seeing that reveals the invisible through the visible, paradoxically intermingling the real and the ideal, the interior and the exterior. Sartre's view of the imagination takes up a similar question—"How can I be both perceptually present and yet absent from my body?"—but answers it differently. According to Sartre, an image is created only in the absence of the real object. However, both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty arrive at a similar conclusion, that an image is not an object but an act of consciousness that bridges subject and object, or "a certain manner in which the object makes appearance to consciousness" (Sartre, 1968, p. 108). Casey (1976, p. 17) prefers the word *imagining*, a noun rather than a verb, suggesting that *to image* is a creative act, a structure of imaginative consciousness that actively connects to its object. One of the ways the static definitions of *body* and *imagination* are maintained is through static objectified language;

a change in the very words *body image* is necessary to bring back movement.

ACTION LANGUAGE

Following the separation of body and imagination, a static language does not describe a moving body nor does the moving body convey language. The second part of my work is to reestablish not body language, therefore, but body as language.

The call to reconnect action and language is noted by Ricoeur: "A new equilibrium between saying and doing must be sought, but it has not yet been found" (Idhe, 1971, p. xiv). Like reading, which occurs between writer and reader, action occurs between mover and witness and, as such, is a text. Ricoeur (1976) said, "It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego" (p. 95). Action language is a text that is a kind of discourse characterized by dialogue, bringing experience to language, communicating the Being or the self of the mover, and opening a world.

A text mediates the correspondence between the invisible and the visible, or the self and the world. Merleau-Ponty's (1963, pp. 93-124) notion of *expressive gestures* describes this shared reality as "the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and the gestures of others" (Zaner, 1964, p. 191). The kind of correspondence that shapes the external visible shape is what he calls "form," which is "a visible or sonorous configuration . . . in which the sensory value of each element is determined by its function in the whole and varies with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 168). Form is a relational entity, not an external object or an internal structure of sense-data, mediating the relation between the expression and the expressed.

When I witness movement, I see several levels of form. Some movements have the everyday appearance of intention and action, others seem more densely coded as symbol, and still others are ritualistic. What are the forms of behavior?

Merleau-Ponty (1963) describes three levels of form: the syncretic, the amovable, and the symbolic. Ricoeur (1976) describes three levels of text, which are comparable to Merleau-Ponty's levels of form and which guide my analysis.

The first level is the phenomenological, teleological, or progressive, which is characterized by "a movement in which each figure finds its meaning, not in what precedes, but in what follows" (Reagan & Stewart, 1978, p. 106). It is distinguished by a movement forward, the presence of consciousness and of intentionality as the dialectic between intuition and meaning. At this level, the form of correspondence between inner impression and outer expression can be described as metaphor, which, according to Ricoeur (cited in Reagan & Stewart, 1978), connects the implicit and the explicit meaning of one part of the whole semantic structure. Two examples of movement as metaphor follow. The first is a description from David Miller (1970):

Just as there is no thing as not-dancing (the man who thinks and feels he is not dancing is simply doing an [intricate] piece of side-stepping), so also the dancer who says that another person is not dancing is himself doing a strange dance. He is dancing the not-dance, because he, at that moment, does not have dancing eyes to see the not-dance of another as itself an intricate dance. (Miller, 1970, p. 172)

A student described the metaphor in her movement as if it were her relationship with her boyfriend:

Did mirror with a partner. I felt that we began to move as one, not as leader-follower. But I didn't really feel a genuine felt-sense. It was there on a shallow level, but deep down I guess I wanted more. It's *like* my relationship with Ron . . . I'm not exactly sure of what I want from him, but I have a feeling of what he wants from me. (emphasis added)

Here the movement is *like* her relationship with her boyfriend, but it is also *not* her relationship with her boyfriend. Through the metaphor of this movement image, her relationship with her boyfriend is reflected. Movement that occurs at the teleological level unites experience and language, communicates intentionality, and demonstrates the structure of metaphor.

Not all movements open to Becoming. Some show regression instead of progression. This second level of text is what Ricoeur (1970) calls the archaeological or the regressive level and demonstrates what he claims Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, the "masters of suspicion" taught him to see as the unconscious. As a unity of *bios* and *logos*, symbol connects conscious and unconscious in a discourse that expresses the dialectic of meaning (the linguistic

pole) and force (the nonlinguistic pole). Archetypal symbols and figures appear at this level of movement. One student described her figure:

The strongest, most singular image I encountered during this class was a dance I call my Goddess dance, which tumbled out of my body the way a shell rolls out of the sea. I had told the group all about the problems with my partner—of being called “bossy”—I wept and felt misunderstood. You selected special music. All my joints softened. Without taking a step I could feel the weight of my body making a hundred little adjustments, a tiny current of energy flowing through every pathway, down to the earth, up to the crown, back and forth. A visual slide show started: Grecian vases showing women in tunics and sandals, their hair bound in fluttering chignons; a Botticelli painting of a soft-boned lady covered with tiny flowers and some gauzy gown . . . I was aware of the fleshiness of the bottoms of my feet, how far I could “step into” them. Sometimes I was dancing with a veil, sometimes with a rope of flowers. I was with other women, one of several dancing. The dance took a serpentine shape, turning back and forth on a line with the feet barely leaving the ground, but the knees fluid.

Susanne Langer (1953) described symbolic movement not as objects but as pulsating forms of expressiveness, “patterns of sentience,” in which the perceptual body and the imaginative body unite in symbolic movement (p. 187). Symbolic movement takes us from consciousness and progressive intentionality to the unconscious, dream and depth. As such, symbolic movement can heal the psychosomatic symptoms of the separation between force and meaning, or perception and imagination.

The third level of movement is what Ricoeur (1970) calls the eschatological level, or the phenomenology of religion. Its language is ritual and story, and it is expressed in movements of transcendence. Form is expressed as patterns of correspondence making implicit connections at a bodily level, marked not only by formal content but by a numinous quality of energy. One student described her movement:

When I move in circular motion, all parts of me move, I feel a great sense of centeredness, of wholeness, a soothing gentleness. In my movement experience, I felt moved and inspired by feeling myself extended out into the universe. As the primitive saw himself as a conglomeration of parts into a whole, as his tribal space was the universe and his body the earth and sky all else, I can feel the wonder of existence surge through me.

Correspondence at this level is between power as the nonlinguistic pole, expressed in terms of space and time: "The preverbal character of such an experience is attested to by the very modulations of space and time as *sacred space* or *sacred time*, which result and which are inscribed beneath language at the aesthetic level of experience" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 61).

Form, at this level, shows in the aesthetic patterns of phrases, qualities, and relationships. When form and power are in balance, the greatest potential for healing occurs: "By understanding himself in and through the signs of the sacred, man performs the most radical transformation of himself that it is possible to imagine" (Reagan & Stewart, 1978, p. 106).

ACTION HERMENEUTICS

Freud's assertions that *latent* meaning is hidden and requires hermeneutical interpretation to be revealed established the classical psychoanalytic position on hermeneutics. This position, however, has been challenged by modernist psychologists and artists for whom Freud's concept still separates image or unconscious from *manifest* behavior or body and for whom the manifest behavior carries meaning. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, a dancer and philosopher, represents the phenomenological perspective in the following:

No matter what happens in this kind of contemporary art, it is the physical, palpable substance of a thing that is its primary reality . . . its meaning, whatever it is for each person, is secondary and it does not appear in a rational context. It has a quality, a vibration, a physical substance . . . what does a woman drying and stacking dishes mean? (Sheets-Johnstone, 1978, p. 12)

Kinesthetic imagining unites the psychoanalytic and the phenomenological perspective with action hermeneutics. In action hermeneutics, the movement itself is a meaning-making process, which moves images close to clarity and meaning. One student reported, for example, "I don't know what happened during the session, but something shifted and felt right. I feel different now than when I came in; I know that a perceptual shift has happened and that I worked something through." Without referring the meaning to an external symbol system, meaning develops from the

action itself. Sartre (1968) describes interpretation as a creative act of consciousness. Interpretation, understood this way, is a creative act that involves another way of knowing. Hillman (1977) described this way of knowing as love: "We must equally call the unfathomable depth in the image, love, or at least say we cannot get to the soul of the image without love for the image" (p. 81).

Said in another way by Sontag (1966): "In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (p. 14).

THERAPEUTIC TASK

Our task as therapists is to restore congruence between thinking, feeling, and action; between psyche, soma, and language; between logos and eros.

We do this by grounding our tradition not in the language of scientific psychology but in an older tradition of rhythm and sound, in image and story, in the arts, and in culture. Psyche has more directly expressed itself through Shakespeare than through Wundt, and ancient people confronted their fears of the universe by dancing them, not by analyzing them. Our work is to bring what Bion called "nameless dread" into consciousness, giving it form and image and a name. Our work is to make the biological body of instinct and drive into a psychological body of image, symbol, and meaning.

Using creative movement as action language restores meaning to human action. Art therapy is not about an object called a painting or a dance, but it is about restoring a sense of coherence and patterning to our world. R. D. Laing said,

[W]e don't want to proliferate a lot of family therapists and psychotherapists and music therapists and art therapists and so on. They should all be included in the same person. Therapy is a form of dance. It reaches back in the Western tradition to music, dance and gymnastics. Over the last 100 years, I've felt that people would do better to learn to sing than to cultivate screaming. We should go for beauty, order, pleasure, and not cultivate cacophony. A therapist should be physically fit to move in synchrony with some highly intelligent people. (Interview with R. D. Laing, n.d.)

Kinesthetic imagining is a theory and an experiential process through which the self is known, composed, and articulated, and meaning is created. As a therapeutic method, kinesthetic imagining

is a dynamic embodied form of imagination in which patients as artists compose themselves and transform their lives. Kinesthetic imagining is both a theoretical understanding and a process of an embodied aesthetic psychology.

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