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*Abstract*

Drawing on case study research in Britain's commercial performance industry and five UK drama schools, this article discusses the actor's experience of their body as capital. It examines actors' narratives of these experiences, and the links that they establish between the perception of the body as an object to be invested in, the employment process of typecasting, and the ongoing contemporary dominance of what Rancière calls the 'representative regime of the arts'. By purposefully confining itself to a capitalist language of supply, demand and value, this discussion of the actor's body emphasizes the reductive nature of such language, and finally proposes possibilities for a re-imagined employment approach that might be drawn from the craft of acting itself.

Audiences are fascinated by the appearance of actors' bodies, and have been for centuries. In 1750, John Hill writes in *The Actor: Treatise on the Art of Playing*:

Tell people that there is a new actress to appear upon the stage such a night, the first question they ask is, Is she handsome? And 'tis ten to one, but they forget to enquire at all whether she has any merit in the profession'. (Hill in Cohen and Calleri 2009, 22)

In recent decades this fascination has expanded to include not simply the actor's appearance, but also the feats of physical transformation they may have undergone for a role. The extent of this preoccupation can be measured by the way in which it is used as a marketing tool in the film industry. In the first two months of 2013 alone, three major film releases in the UK and US are accompanied by British news-stories of the physical duress of extreme weight-loss undergone by their lead actors. [1] This is a reflection, and simultaneously a reinforcement, of a general preoccupation with the appearance of bodies in those cultures which have been infiltrated by global marketing machines aiming to profit from a narrative of physical 'improvement'. As body activist and psychotherapist Susie Orbach notes:

Globalism brings uniformity to visual culture... We want to belong — to be inside, not outside, the global story — and the means to enter it is often taking up its stylistic and visually oriented markets. (2009, 88)

For the actor, this fascination with their appearance means that part of their profession is constituted by the consideration of, and dedication to, what has been termed "aesthetic labour" (Warhurst et al. 2000). [2] Elsewhere I have discussed the implications which aesthetic labour may have for the actor's imaginative and cognitive processes (Mitchell 2014). Here, drawing on case study research in five UK drama schools and with 44 professional actors working in the UK, I focus on the notion of physical capital in relation to typecasting in the acting profession, and in particular on the way actors narrate and manage its impact on their lives. [3]

### *The Actor's Physical Capital*

Actors working within the contemporary performance industry, and in specifically in the commercial sector, are inevitably part of a capitalist system of exchange. This must be taken into consideration when examining how their bodies are seen, treated and valued. As David Harvey emphasizes:

Since we all live within the world of capital circulation and accumulation this has to be a part of any argument about the nature of the contemporary body. To evade it...is to evade a vital aspect of how the body must be problematized. (Harvey 2000, 102)

By examining the actor's 'physical capital', we may thus usefully employ the language of capitalism to reveal the ways in which it operates on and through the actor's body. Sociologist Chris Shilling uses the term physical capital to describe the way in which the body in itself is assigned value within the terms of exchange in contemporary society, building on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) central engagement with the role of the body in his theory of social reproduction:

The body has become a more comprehensive form of *physical capital*; a possessor of power, status, and distinctive symbolic forms which is integral to the accumulation of various resources. The production of physical capital refers to the development of bodies in ways which are recognized as possessing value in certain social fields. (Shilling 2003, 111)

In the specific field of acting then, the value of physical capital is measured in relation to its capacity to be converted into economic capital — employment and career development — and what might be called artistic capital — the capacity for skilled performance. Aside from other, more idealistic measures of value, the reality for most actors, in a profession where the actor works “an average of 11.3 weeks of the year”, is that despite often understanding themselves first and foremost as artists and craftspeople, they also need to consider the value of their professional identity in terms of what can ensure that they are able to make a living (Drama UK Advice 2013). Following Bourdieu's premise that the way in which people treat their bodies “reveals the deepest dispositions of their habitus”, the way in which actors treat their bodies may often reveal the perception of the body as a product, as something that is always already partly owned by someone else (1984, 190):

Obviously actors are — some people would disagree with me here, but, essentially prostitutes. They sell their body for other people's entertainment, so, depending on what your morals are, your ethics, then you may need to change yourself an extreme amount. (Male 2<sup>nd</sup> year student, School X 2011) [4]

The understanding of the actor's physical capital needs to be able to include the value of what the actor can do — their skill and craft — as well as how they appear. Within the definition of the actor's physical capital, I thus propose the sub-categories of *active* physical capital and *aesthetic* physical capital. *Active* physical capital accounts for what the body can do, what it is capable of, its actions. *Aesthetic* physical capital accounts for the appearance of the body, and to some extent is read as the product of the bodies' actions. [5] *Active* and *aesthetic* physical capital are usually read in relation to one another. For example, a muscular body can be understood in certain fields as having a large amount of *aesthetic* physical capital, and in correlation may well be read as being rich in *active* physical capital in a context where muscles are valued for signifying strength. However, there are many cases where such assumptions reveal themselves as mis-readings, as for example muscles carefully sculpted through repetitive movements in a gym do not necessarily translate into strength in everyday activities.

In general, for the actor one version of physical capital alone is not sufficient to guarantee success: active and aesthetic physical capital — skill in using the body and appearance of the body — must come together in order to be converted into economic and artistic capital. However, as the following discussion of case studies shows, the ratio of value between active and aesthetic physical capital shifts and changes depending on the individual and their life- and employment situation, and consequently also shifts the way in which the actor perceives, maintains and ‘uses’ the body. The ratio of how value is placed on active or aesthetic physical capital may also be very different in different cultures or historical moments.

It is important to note that I am not using the term ‘aesthetic’ to refer to one particular, ideal version of ‘beauty’. Rather, it describes the aesthetic physical capital that is in demand in a specific field. The value of the physical, like any form of capital, depends on the terms of exchange. A very large nose, for example, may not be considered ‘beautiful’ in contemporary culture, but in the field of the performance industry it can have a high value if there are only very few people who possess this aesthetic physical capital. This means that someone who would be deemed ‘ugly’ in the contemporary value system of ‘beauty’ may still possess incredible aesthetic physical capital within the field of the acting profession, provided this particular physical attribute is in relatively high demand with a low supply available: “I have times where I think ‘oh god, I wish I was *really* fat’... Because would give me all the fat parts” (Female prof. Actor A, aged 51, 2011). Physical attributes perceived to signify ethnicity or class can be seen to follow similar laws of supply and demand.

Actors can experience this valuing of their particular appearance as an incentive to — as they are so often encouraged — ‘be yourself’ and make the most of their unique attributes. The desire to encounter actors ‘being themselves’ is evident in this statement by casting director Sarah Hughes: “I think that’s one of the big things at drama school, to bring out confident communicators who go. ‘this is me, this is what I look like, this is who I am, here I am and I am fit for purpose” (Sarah Hughes, RCSSD Open Space 2009). However, any sense of ownership which this promises is still limited by being a part of the terms of exchange of the marketplace. Mark Evans (2009) notes that the actor’s ability to gain political ownership over their own body is thus contingent, “created and sustained within the context of a desire to succeed in an industry that requires specific commercial uses of their bodies” (2009, 136). It is, for instance, possible to recognize certain ‘fashions of the body’ within the performance industry, which may suddenly dramatically increase the value of a specific type of aesthetic physical capital, and correspondingly decrease the value of others. As Entwistle and Wissinger emphasize:

Capitalism constantly innovates ways of extracting value and, by implication, working bodies have to constantly adapt if they are to keep pace with the market conditions under which they sell their labour. (2006, 780)

### *Experiencing the Value of Aesthetic Physical Capital: Actor's Narratives*

Success or failure in acquiring certain kinds of roles, and feedback from industry stakeholders and peers, all give the actor information about what aspects of their physicality are seen by the industry as valuable, and whether these can be converted into the types of capital that guarantee economic survival and/or artistic satisfaction. The importance of considering the value of both active *and* aesthetic physical capital within this, and the impact on the actor's relationship with their body, can be illustrated by examining the experiences of Sam, an actor in his thirties, who has worked fairly regularly since graduating. Initially, when questioned about his relationship with his body, he answers:

I, my body — I have issues with my weight in that it fluctuates. I think that was kind of passed on to me through my mother who brought me up who had issues with her weight. And I think that I have, as a result of that, I am the kind of actor who diets ridiculously, goes through binge diets of 'I'm going to cut major food groups out of my diet'. In order to achieve something. (Sam 2011)

Here he mentions that his relationship with his body and weight may be connected to his upbringing, re-emphasizing the complexity of sociocultural factors that play a part in the actor's experience of their body. However, in addition to this, at a later stage, he describes a situation which further explains his concerns about his aesthetic physical capital. He recounts an audition situation in which his agent tells him that "You gave the most brilliant audition, they loved you, but they've decided to go with somebody who's leaner for the part" (Sam 2011). In addition to this experience, for Sam the awareness of an alternative version to this narrative also shapes his relationship with his body. The alternative is one in which the actor under consideration for the part may be employed, but with the explicit request to change — to invest time, effort, and possibly money, into their aesthetic physical capital, in order to be considered 'right' for the part:

Equally, I think I'm the kind of actor who also really would — well I have, I've been paid to — go to the place of transforming my body to the extreme by putting on weight to play a part. (Sam 2011)

It is perhaps unsurprising that actors accede to such transformations of the flesh, if they encounter the logic of industry stakeholders such as this director:

I was casting somebody who needed to do a sword-fight topless. And I wanted him to just put on some more muscle and kind of work out and stuff like that... Because he didn't — I really liked him as an actor, and I really loved what he brought in. I really loved his opponent in it. But it just looked like he would get destroyed. There was no question of who was going to win (The Body Politics of Working With Actors workshop 2012).

The demand for such willingness to change for the industry is re-iterated in a number of interviews with working actors. Eliza, who has been working

continuously since graduating a year before our interview, describes a first meeting with her agent that clearly illustrates the emphasis he lays on aesthetic physical capital:

So I came into my interview with this agent, that I'm now with, and he was like: I hate your hair, I hate your make-up, I hate your dress, you're too tall so don't wear high heels. What parts would you want to play?  
And I said ooh, I'd like to be like maybe Penny in Hairspray? And he said no, Penny is played by a thin girl, she's there to make Tracy look fatter, you couldn't play Penny. So I was like ok. He was like could you make her look fatter? No, you couldn't.  
I was like, oh, alright.  
And then for some reason they took me on, and because they were established I went with them. (Eliza, aged 22, 2011)

Eliza showed great determination in my conversation with her to not be defined by her appearance alone. Despite this, the description of her first encounter with industry stakeholders shows that from the outset the industry is steering her towards a certain packaging of identity, requiring her to constantly justify decisions she makes about her body to her agent. Eliza recounts another instance, in which her agent calls to tell her he saw her in a dress she should no longer wear because he thinks it makes her "bum look big" (Eliza 2011). [6] Up until this point in the interview, she has been very outspoken about her disapproval of teachers or industry stakeholders who try to influence actors' body-shape and weight. However, when asked whether she has considered leaving this agent she says "Oh, I need to actually. But the thing is, it's really stupid, because everyone's like: Don't leave them, they're so good!" (Eliza 2011). The focus is laid on her aesthetic physical capital by an influential professional gatekeeper, and it is difficult for her to shift that focus from within the power dynamics of the marketplace — without feeling that she might damage her career.

This specific young actor remains determined not to let her agent's comments dictate the degree to which she focuses on her appearance. The struggle which this poses for her, straddling a responsibility towards herself and towards her business, is clear, and one which she is acutely aware of. Initially she maintains her standpoint that she will not change for the industry:

Maybe I'm naïve and maybe in five, ten years I'll be like 'oh no, absolutely you have to fit some kind of image build', but for as long as I can I'm just going to maintain that you'd just be better off being yourself, do you know what I mean?  
Don't get me wrong, if I was grotesquely obese and eating seven pizzas every night I'd be like, well maybe I need to change something. But I'm eating a healthy, balanced diet with loads of fruit and veg and loads of exercise and I go to the gym every day, and I walk and I run, and I just think, just fret about something else. There's bloody earthquakes in Turkey and people dying of starvation in Africa and I'd rather just concentrate my efforts on something else than...yeah. (Eliza 2011)

Later however, when asked whether she would consider losing weight for a desirable job, she acknowledges:

I'd probably lose weight for it, but it's not that easy, and I don't think it would necessarily be a healthy thing, because I think the shape that I am now is probably the shape I'm supposed to be, but... that kind of goes to show, for something like that, if it was plausible to do then I would probably try. (Eliza 2011)

The negotiation of this kind of dilemma over time may shape the way in which actors conceptualize and manage their embodiment. In the case studies in question, it often manifests in a constant search for the 'appropriate' body. Interviews and surveys reveal a whole spectrum of body management strategies to help resolve this search, from choices of hair colour, via weight-loss and muscle-building programmes, through to plastic surgery (Mitchell, 2014). The disciplining of emotions and drives associated with such body management over time can lead to the body being "treated and experienced as an *object* to be reflected upon and managed in line with external demands" (Shilling 2010, 159, original emphasis). As I discuss in more detail elsewhere, this may lead to a new set of habits that are embedded in the individual's cognitive systems, and thus a sense of self that is profoundly influenced by the employment practices of the performance industry (Mitchell 2014).

A small but noteworthy number of participants describe situations in which they have explicitly been asked to, for example, lose weight or consider changes to their teeth, or have been 'abandoned' because of their appearance:

I had a really good agent when I left drama school, and I was sort of dropped after the first year, and they said that it was because they felt that I was a good actress but that I wasn't as commercially viable as some of the other girls in my year. Which I think was a reference really to what I look like. (Female prof actor E, aged 28, 2011)

Interestingly however, more often participants' narratives of such situations pertain to friends and colleagues, rather than themselves:

I know there have been people who have been told by agents and casting directors that they should try to lose weight, or should not put on any more weight.... You hear stories about people being told to lose weight, people have their teeth done or their nose done, or their boobs done or whatever. (Female prof. actor A, aged 28, 2011)

It seems significant that narratives of such situations continue to circulate, with almost every actor interviewed giving an example, if not relating to themselves then at least to someone they know. How much of this anecdotal evidence is representative of the working practices in the UK performance industry requires further comprehensive research. However, the fact that actors continue to recount these narratives in itself implies an important point: Even if actors are



not explicitly asked to change, the dynamics of supply and demand in the physical capital marketplace — including all the complex sociocultural, political, economic, artistic and aesthetic factors that drive it — serve to generate an underlying and pervasive pressure to define and create an ‘appropriate’ body. Emily, an actor in her mid-fifties, illustrates the relentless reassessment of aesthetic physical capital value which this requires:

I inwardly criticise myself whenever I look in the mirror and mentally/physically make the changes to my brows and nose that I feel would benefit me. (I had a nose job in my 20s -because I was made to feel my face was ‘only good for comedy’. This I almost immediately realised was a great mistake. I should have stuck with what was mine. This is the great danger of plastic surgery. You lose character, and to some extent yourself.) Because I don't like my appearance I avoid looking at myself on film (which I really should in order to judge/improve my screen technique). (Emily 2012)

This kind of internalized pressure is perhaps no less real to the actor than the explicit demands made by the performance industry. Recounting narratives that have occurred to others may be a way to make the implicit tangible, justifying feelings of body anxiety and helping to resist any implication that this anxiety is simply a case of vanity. The accusation of vanity lays the blame for any distress in relation to embodiment on the individual actor, rather than considering the overall dynamics of the employment culture in which they are working.

#### *Categories of Value: Typecasting and the actor's physical capital*

The world outside is looking in a particular way. And I think it's important that [student actors] know the truth about that. In order to know what to do with it (Professional Preparation tutor, School T 2011).

Particularly for actors working in the commercial performance industry, the notion of the body as an object, or as capital to be managed and presented, stands in close relationship to the way they are read by the world. It consequently also relates closely to the way the industry translates that reading into marketable or ‘believable’ casting types. Typecasting and stereotypes play a crucial role in the employment of actors, and within this, being valued by the performance industry for one specific type of embodiment is not always a positive experience for the actor. To begin with, some actors associate typecasting with a degree of limitation. While physical characteristics such as ginger hair, crooked teeth or dark skin may have a high exchange value in a specific field of employment, they are often connected with specific types of role. The actor becomes aware that certain physical attributes may be valuable in the process of gaining employment, but may also mean that employment possibilities are limited in terms of their diversity. For some actors then, the thought of their career trajectory being shaped by aspects of their appearance over which they have control only to a certain degree is frustrating. The latter speak of their skill as actors to transform their way of being in the world, which

means that for them their active physical capital should be the deciding factor in their employment, or at least have a greater degree of value and importance than their aesthetic physical capital:

There's a part of me that really rebels against that, and I sort of think...you bloody casting people, please can you use your imagination. Just *use* your imaginations. (Female prof. actor A, aged 51, 2011)

A second aspect of the actor's resistance to casting-types may be related to the experience that repeatedly occupying a specific type of role can lead to a conflation of the actor's personality with the role they are frequently seen to be portraying professionally. Certain moral judgements which society makes on the basis of appearance may be transferred, from the type which the actor markets themselves as, to the perception of personality of the actor themselves. Bonnie, an actor in her early fifties, describes how a teacher in her training suggested to her that she would benefit from marketing herself as a 'character' actor. They did so on the basis of her unusual hair and features which were deemed as appropriate and valuable only in representing a certain type of character:

I think at the time it really pissed me off actually, because basically what you're saying is 'oh you're a character actress' — you're not very pretty and you haven't got cheekbones, that is what that means. So 'you'll be, we'll cast you as the men, or the funny women' — it immediately puts you in comedy, you know, put on silly voices and all that. I suppose it is quite liberating, but it is also, it's a knock! [laughs]  
Because, you know, you know where you are. (Bonnie 2011)

The dynamics of power that are played out through the subject of type-casting are thus articulated through a 'naming' of identity which ostensibly relates to professional employment, but which is in fact also perceived by this actor as a definition of her personal identity by those who employ her.

This experience of typecasting is further complicated by the fact that the actor's aesthetic physical capital value in the market may direct them towards reproducing stereotypes in ways that undermine their personal politics and beliefs. The choice of whether or not to agree to this reproduction of stereotypes appears to lie with the actor themselves, "depending on what your morals are, your ethics" (Male 2<sup>nd</sup> year student P, School X 2011). This issue was raised at a roundtable discussion of the Asian Performing Arts Forum in 2012. Debating the question of why British Asian actors continue to take on roles which perpetuate a two-dimensional stereotype, a number of actors suggested that these roles at least offered some visibility to their specific acting community, as well as being economically difficult to refuse in a climate of limited employment opportunity (APAF 2012). It thus seems important to problematize the degree to which real choice is available to the actors. Michael Sandel (2012) examines how markets and market values have come to govern more and more aspects of those societies that have a market economy. One of his arguments within this is that

Market reasoning... empties public life of moral argument. Part of the appeal of markets is that they don't pass judgment on the preferences they satisfy... If someone is willing to pay for sex or a kidney, and a consenting adult is willing to sell, the only question the economist asks is 'How much?' (2012, 14)

A similar argument might be made for the process through which the actor 'sells' their body: we assume that actors are consenting adults who are seldom explicitly forced into embodied practices, and are thus making their own choices about how they agree to employ their bodies. Inevitably though, with choice comes consequence. This actor, for example, feels "irresponsible" for not complying with the demands she perceives from the industry to make herself "castable":

I feel by not making the changes that would be possible (losing weight, getting a blepharoplasty, being better groomed) I am being irresponsible. I know what the business requires and it's up to me to make myself as castable as possible. (Female professional actor, aged 55, 2012)

For actors to resist the danger of their bodies becoming aesthetic objects in money-making regimes, and to resist becoming the literal manifestation of cultural stereotypes and hierarchies, may pose a real risk to their professional identity.

On occasion these risks are taken, albeit often from a place of relative security in an already established career. The past decade has seen a rise in public debates about body anxiety and its links to the cultural representation of bodies in media and public settings. Fuelled by the grass-roots activism of organizations such as All Walks Beyond the Catwalk and Endangered Bodies, and the efforts of Girl Guiding UK and the YMCA, the UK now has an All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image, established in 2011 (Campaign for Body Confidence 2011). This increasing dialogue over the impact of body anxiety on social dynamics and wellbeing is accompanied by a public rumble of dissent from the acting profession over the use, representation, and expectation of their bodies. Actor Romola Garai for example speaks out against the pressure to lose weight in a 2012 interview, stating that

My weight was a very big issue when I started. I was then - and am now - a very normal size 10. But that's not acceptable. Everyone's aware of it... If you want the profile, you have to lose the weight... I know I'm being 'trimmed', I'm being airbrushed a lot. And I know that people are accepting those images and are under the impression that that is really how my body looks, that I'm hairless and sexless and weigh 90lbs. That really worries me. And I really don't know what to do, except talk about it. (Garai in Noah 2012).

In 2014, actor Keira Knightley agreed to a topless photoshoot on the condition that the images not be airbrushed, in a reaction to a poster for one of her previous roles in which she claimed her breasts were digitally augmented

without consultation with the actor (Brown 2014). BBC critic Philip Hensher's review of ITV drama *Prey*, in which his main comment on the lead actor was to repeatedly describe her as the "fat lady detective", generated an outraged social media response from the makers and cast of *Prey*, as well as its audiences (Rigby 2014). Alongside these examples from the TV and film world, a number of theatre productions on the fringes of the mainstream satirize the emphasis laid on the performers' bodies, and seek to subvert it. In *Fabulous Creatures*, self-proclaimed as "a feminist fairy tale" by UK-based company The Ruby Dolls, the main character finds herself inadvertently tangled in a beauty contest, in which the big prize is the ultimate anti-ageing treatment:

Yes, there's one way / To erase all signs  
Hair that has gone grey / Wrinkles and fine lines  
We at your fears scoff / You will stay perfect  
It'll take years off / 'Cause you're worth it

To watch her bruise / Would make us sad  
To see her lose / All that she had  
Get old and ill / Would make us cry  
So that something / Can stay quite still  
She has to die (Abigail Burgess, The Ruby Dolls 2014)

In other cases however, the narratives the actors tell, even when emphasizing the negative and the surreal about how they are asked to transform their flesh, highlight the fact that some impressive success stories centre around actors who have invested in their aesthetic physical capital by drastically changing their bodies. One example of this is an interview with British actor Rafe Spall, published in the Guardian newspaper in 2013. This article describes Spall's development from being an actor who is "a bit porky, not much of a looker", and who is typecast "invariably as the fat boy, the joker, the smartarse", to a "svelte, smart" romantic lead in the romantic comedy *I Give It A Year* (Hattenstone 2013). Spall tells of a long audition process in which he was asked to return four times, a period during which he began to run, diet, and change his hairstyle:

They'd say, 'You need to work on maybe becoming more handsome.'... They wanted to turn me into somebody that an audience could believe Rose Byrne [the female lead] could find attractive. So for 16 weeks I ate no wheat, dairy or sugar. It was an absolute nightmare. (Spall in Hattenstone 2013)

Spall acknowledges the negative impact of this aspect of his profession, as something that is "bad for the soul":

To look like that, I had to dedicate my life to it. And that's dreadful. There's nothing so unattractive as vanity... particularly male vanity. My wife hated it. She would rather I ate a lasagne than look good. (Spall in Hattenstone 2013)

However, the fact remains that it was his investment in aesthetic physical capital, his commitment to transforming his body, which despite the negative consequences enabled a career-move from supporting part to lead role.

Thus, as the discussion of the actor's physical capital has shown, while the actor may not be explicitly forced to present a certain body, elements of economic necessity and desire for artistic self-actualization may mean that actors feel coerced through the power dynamics of the market to accept certain physical practices or types of employment. As Sandel states, "Market choices are not free choices if some people are... poor or lack the ability to bargain on fair terms" (2012, 112). Bargaining here relates to the possibility for actors to refuse the pressure to be a certain shape or size, or to re-produce certain stereotypes:

Actors are merely trying to keep up with the changing business in order to get work... and if that means working on your appearance, so be it.  
(Female prof. actor, aged 26, 2012)

Within the discourse on typecasting, a further major influence on the fluctuation of value placed on an actor's body emerges through what Jacques Rancière (2004) terms the "representative regime of the arts" — an understanding of art that demands adherence to the rules of genre, ways of structuring, doing and making that create and re-affirm hierarchies and versions of normativity (Rancière 2004, 22). Included in the "representative regime of the arts" is a belief that action and narration should hold primacy over character and description, which, in terms of the casting of actors, means that their body should appear in such a way that it does not obstruct the audience's understanding of the story. Here then, aesthetic physical capital becomes representative and reflective of existing cultural hierarchies: In order to drive forward the action as intended, or to convey the message of the narrative, the actor's body is selected and used according to what is deemed an appropriate appearance for the genre in question. Traditional casting types are crystallized moments of this process, reflecting traditions of representation: the 'handsome hero', the 'young and beautiful ingénue', the 'fat best friend', the 'Asian restaurant-owner'. Experience of these employment-processes within the commercial performance industry, coupled with an awareness of the "representative regime of the arts", lead many actors to believe that categorization according to casting type is inevitable by the nature of their profession (Rancière 2004, 22):

You're in workshops with people who are young, middle-eastern guys, and they're going 'oh, I always get cast as the terrorist' — and you're like 'well, at least you're being cast. That is the main thing.' Yes, it must be frustrating always just being the terrorist in Spooks. But unfortunately it is kind of the way it is. And I suppose that is because of the way the viewers respond to what they see on the TV. They *do* make snap decisions and judgements and they read so much from the initial look of someone. (Female prof. actor F, aged 27, 2011)

Indeed, within the political and economic arena of twenty-first-century Britain where many theatres and theatre companies struggle for survival in a barely subsidized performance industry, the contradiction, subversion or ignoring of casting types continues to be perceived as a possible risk. There are always a number of exceptions, where what can arguably be classed as the commercial performance industry explicitly seeks to expand the possibilities of who is seen in what role. Examples might be Phyllida Lloyd's all-female productions of *Julius Ceasar* (Donmar Warehouse 2012) and *Henry IV* (Donmar Warehouse 2014). However, as one casting director notes, there are still many industry stakeholders who argue that the audience may be alienated or confused, or the 'authenticity' of a performance text spoilt, if the embodiment of a certain role is "non-traditional" (Pao 2010, 23): "You can get into these ... very very precise arguments about, 'well, the audience wouldn't understand'" (Casting Director A 2012). Indeed, the following comment from a "paying audience member" seems to confirm this position:

From the point of view of a forgotten segment of the theater community—the paying audience member... It is especially annoying when roles are assigned to actors whose appearance precludes them being related to one another—a very dark African American Gertrude and a very pale, red-haired Hamlet, for example... Why is it so hard to accept that acting is one of the few professions in which one's physical appearance is central to the job? If that seems unfair, it is. You are also free to choose another profession. (Lbendavid commenting on Schechner 2010)

In the face of comments such as this, what has worked in the past may seem the safest bet for those parts of the performance industry whose investment relies heavily on audiences voting with their feet, and giving the desired numbers of 'bums on seats'. [7] Particularly following the cuts in arts funding in the wake of the economic crisis that began in 2008, some observe a move backwards within the performance industry in what is marketed as 'British Theatre'. Playwright and actor Nathaniel Martello White, whose play *Blackta* (Young Vic 2012) illustrates some of the difficulties that actors of colour face in being cast outside aesthetic stereotypes, comments on this. He notes a movement backwards specifically in relation to the employment possibilities for non-white actors:

I think the industry could try harder. Part of the problem is we are in a recession, when I left Drama School about 6 years ago the climate felt different and it felt like things were moving forward. The recession is making the industry revert back to things they know can make money (Williams 2012).

In this climate, the possibility of shifts in the value of the actor's physical capital, and a balance of emphasis between the active and the aesthetic aspects of this capital, become challenging to imagine for both actors and those who hold stake in their bodies. As this actor notes in reference to traditional typecasting:

I suppose I'd like to challenge that. But at the same time I understand that the theatre deals with reflecting real life, and I think maybe real life has to

come first. And we *do* still live in a very segregated society in places, there are still a lot of opinions that are not as open-minded as they hopefully will be in years to come. (Female prof. actor F, aged 27, 2011)

### *Conclusion*

As the reader may have become aware by this point, the attempt to use capitalist language of supply, demand and value to examine the dynamics within which the actor experiences their body reveals the reductive nature of such language, and of the processes it describes. The discussion of the case studies and of the employment processes to which they refer indicate that a perception of the body as capital is indeed often a fact of the actor's professional and personal identity. The exercise of confining this discussion to the value placed on different aspects of the actor's embodied labour highlights the pervasiveness with which the actor's body is understood as capital to be invested in, and the (self-) objectification which this entails. Whilst it is useful and necessary to become aware of these processes, it is important to acknowledge the threat to agency which they imply. Acceptance that their profession requires submission to the economic and moral dynamics of a physical capital marketplace leaves the actor little opportunity for resistance.

I would suggest, however, that the possibility for a different employment landscape might be made reality if industry stakeholders became more proficient in articulating the *quality* that they are looking for in a particular role. Many casting calls currently rely on an outer form which can only be achieved by investment in aesthetic physical capital, and revert back to the existing landscape of bodies in the performance industry:

He looks 25. Toy Boy Hot!!... He is very very charming, handsome and funny, but not very bright. A BIT of a thug really, but totally drop-dead gorgeous with it! The Stud (Oliver Tobias) John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, Richard Gere in American Gigolo. Good Role. (Spotlight UK, pers. comm. 2011)

The number and diversity of actors available for employers to choose from may mean that, as one actor states, the industry is "spoilt for choice, so that they can specify what they want and have a reasonable hope of getting it" (Female working actor, aged 51, 2012) and that "casting is in essence superficial. Transformative work is really not the norm" (Male working actor, aged 40, 2012). These comments suggest a perception that the industry as it currently operates may lose sight of the fact that a highly skilled actor can, through their craft, transform the audience's perception of their aesthetic physical capital. Caught within the "representative regime of the arts", the conventions of realism demand that 'in the dialogue between the real presence of the actor and the imaginary figure of the character, the voice of the former must be submerged beneath the voice of the latter' (Pao 2010, 25). Thus good acting is frequently equated with a hyper-realism that reproduces nature, rather than holding a mirror up to it.

In a different approach, however, a role might be described through a quality, rather than surface: of lightness, of a moth, of a worn leather boot — or in this example in a casting call for Ophelia, a “soft dainty quality, warm voice, movement orientated. Skilled at a string or percussion instrument” (The Body Politics of Working With Actors workshop 2012). These qualities are playable for the actor, opening up the possibility for transformation through their craft, regardless of the physical facts of their body. After all, actors are specifically trained to be able, given the opportunity, to transcend and transform the way in which the surface of their body is read, by the way in which they use it to interact with the world. [8]

Whilst necessarily remaining within the structures of capitalist exchange, actors thus can, and do, find greater agency within their own personal-professional narratives, by de-coding the demands of the industry for an aesthetic, translating them into something ‘playable’, and identifying whether this quality is a strength within their expressive range. However, the responsibility to do so should not remain with actors alone. Processes of typecasting and the objectification of the actor’s body might be problematized and subverted in exciting ways if those people who write for, cast and direct actors were to focus on developing their capacity for a language of — and eye for — qualities, rather than relying on a shorthand of appearance that is heavily determined by what is, at the cost of what might be.

### *Endnotes*

[1] These three news stories include Rafe Spall’s weight-loss for the romantic comedy *I Give It A Year* (Spall in Hattenstone 2013), Anne Hathaway’s weight-loss for her role as Fantine in the 2013 film-version of *Les Misérables* (Cox 2013), and Ashton Kutcher’s extreme diet for the role of Steve Jobs in *jOBS* (Vincent 2013).

[2] In relation to interactive service work, Warhurst et al. define aesthetic labour as ‘a supply of ‘embodied capacities and attributes’ possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. Employers then mobilise, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into ‘competencies’ or ‘skills’ which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a ‘style’ of service encounter’.  
(Warhurst et al. 2000, 4)

[3] This paper is based on case study research conducted over two and a half years. It involved 32 students (15 female and 17 male) and ten teachers (six female, three male) on undergraduate Acting courses at five UK Drama schools, as well as 44 professional actors (29 female, 15 male) trained and based in the



UK. Student participants were aged between 18 and 28, while professional actors covered a wide age spectrum between the ages of 22 and 75. Selection of participants was random — dependent on availability, willingness to engage with the topic, and the institutions' concession to allow the researcher access. The research was comprised of formal interviews with 24 students, ten teachers, and nine professional actors, while the remaining participants completed an online survey. It also draws upon over 60 hours of observation at two participating institutions, including movement, acting and voice lessons and professional preparation seminars. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, all individuals and institutions referred to in relation to the fieldwork have been anonymised. It should however be noted that the participating institutions are all members of Drama UK, the accrediting body for vocational performing arts courses in the UK which has 20 member schools (Mitchell, 2014).

[4] This student's statement shows a particularly radical view of the actor's body as a commodity, considering the fact that actors for centuries have been trying to escape the association between their profession and prostitution. As Kirsten Pullen states in *Actresses and Whores*, 'Acting histories tend to salvage the actress from her association with the prostitute by focusing on her insipient professionalization' (2005, 3). For the student quoted above however, the selling of his body seems precisely at the centre of his professionalization.

[5] This distinction between active and aesthetic physical capital may usefully be compared to cognitive scientist and philosopher Shaun Gallagher's analysis of the experience of the body, in which he distinguishes between 'body image', linked to perception, and 'body schema', related to the accomplishment of an action. Both interact in complex ways, and influence one another, so that for example 'body image sometimes has an effect on the postural or motor performances of body schemas' (Gallagher 2005, 34-35).

[6] The situation described here illustrates the lack of boundaries between the actor's personal and professional body in relation to business and stakeholders. Entwistle and Wissinger suggest that these boundaries are particularly blurred for freelance workers, such as actors or models, who must not only constantly work to maintain their appearance, but must also always consider the possibility of encountering potential employers in everyday situations: 'While the corporate "self" demanded in the service industries can be donned and removed at the end of the working day, freelance work involves little separation between work and private 'self' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006, 787).

[7] Parts of the performance industry also need to assess their accountability in relation to political agendas, as public money is filtered and distributed according to the criteria of the Arts Council England. Jen Harvie remarks in 2005 that what little money the government provides regulates what they want to market as 'British Theatre'. She argues that although this is more diverse now than it used to be, it could be said that it has merely found another "tradition" to market, moving from a focus on Shakespeare and Jane Austen to that of "a

'house' writing style (Royal Court) and a 'house' performance style (UK postmodern performance art)" (Harvie 2005, 30).

[8] An example of this kind of transformation is Judi Dench's performance in *Peter and Alice* (Noel Coward Theatre, London 2013) in which the then 77-year-old actor "carries off the astonishing feat of playing Alice in childhood and proves genuinely touching rather than embarrassing" (Spencer 2013).

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