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Taking Up the Bodies and Bringing Forth a World: Lecoq's Actor Training and Enactivism

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**Taking Up the Bodies and Bringing Forth a World: Lecoq's Actor Training  
and Enactivism**

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Take up the Bodies.

-Fortinbras, *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 2, line 403

*Question 1:* What is cognition?

*Answer:* Enaction: A history of structural coupling that brings forth a world

-*The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and the Human Experience*, page 206

This project looks at how actor training, and specifically the body-based pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq, in the realm of theatre training and theatre making, have anticipated the articulation of an enactive approach to cognition. In turn, applying key insights from the enactive cognitive approach and the practices of Lecoq pedagogy explains just how much the pedagogy is actually about creative agency, and can shed light on the purpose of some major practices in Lecoq pedagogy that may have thus far gone misunderstood or unarticulated beyond the studio.

A brief introduction to Lecoq pedagogy

Lecoq's pedagogy grew out of a variety of influences including sport and a host of European performance traditions. He is unique in that he developed his pedagogy in basically one place for over 40 years: his private school in Paris from 1956 until his death in 1999. The school continues to be run by his successors. The focus of Lecoq's pedagogy is the potential of the moving body to access creativity and serve as the engine for not only the actor's development but also theatrical creation as a whole. For Lecoq, the goal of his pedagogical training is to forge the "actor-creator," or a figure that has a broader agency than merely interpretive agency. The actor-creator may indeed successfully interpret existing roles, but more

importantly, she can function as an authorial figure, using space, time, bodies, and movement as her aesthetic material. While many of Lecoq's exercises and approaches can be illuminated through the lens of enactivism, one of my larger projects, here I will focus on one of Lecoq's major pedagogical approaches, what some scholars call is "*via negativa*."

#### The Lecoq pedagogy's teacher-student relationship: satisficing

In many movement trainings such as dance or even sport, imitation is a major pedagogical approach. The teacher provides a model for what the student should do and the student's task is to copy it as accurately as possible. Through the process of copying, the student gathers up a host of skills and normally improves her movement through repetition and over time. In this way the student is given a clear goal – an ideal movement – and can often gauge how close she is at arriving at that ideal, depending on her sensitivity. While students of the Lecoq pedagogy may find imitation useful in certain exercises, one of Lecoq's major pedagogical approaches turns this process inside out. Lecoq does not name this process, but other scholars, following John Wright, have dubbed it a form of "*via negativa*."<sup>1</sup> In this process of Lecoq pedagogy, the instructor tells the students what *not* to do instead of what *to* do. The instructor will offer a creative prompt or problem to solve, opens the floor up to student proposals, and comments on what is *not* working. Furthermore, the prompts may not be very concrete but rather highly metaphorical and/or open to interpretation. In this way students who try to answer the prompt are necessarily working under

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Simon Murray. For the first discussion of Lecoq's approach in this way, see Wright's "The Masks of Jacques Lecoq."

uncertainty and are often unsure of the framework of the prompt. Thus this process is not prescriptive or affirmative, but turns upon negation<sup>2</sup>.

This approach is used in work with the neutral mask – a mask that is intended to have no particular expression. In a foundational mask exercise, the instructor might invite the actors to perform “the neutral mask wakes up for the first time.” She will not tell the actor what to do at all or give any other instructions. Students may naturally be perplexed and ask further questions, which the instructor may refuse to answer. Eventually a student will try something. Depending on the proposal put forth by the student, the instructor might just give some version of “No. Next actor?” Or the instructor might make few and perhaps cryptic comments that seem to authorize some behavior and unauthorize others. For instance, many actors new to the neutral mask, when they put it on, start standing up and then waggle their hands in front of their faces. An instructor might say something to effect of “You didn’t wake up, you were already there.” Or “Hmm... The prompt was *not* for the neutral mask to discover her fingers for the first time.” In this sense, the instructor gave a prompt, but really only responded in negation to what the actor does. As the exercise continues and new actors make new proposals, students start to see that you can learn from what went before you. If the instructor said not to waggle your fingers to the previous person the next actor refrains from waggling his fingers and does something else instead. Normally after a round of such comments a student eventually starts in a lying down position rather than standing up. If the instructor no longer says anything to the effect of “you didn’t wake up you were already there” the absence of this confirms for the group that their choice was a useful one. From then on subsequent students start from

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<sup>2</sup> Lecoq-based teachers may adjust their approaches to a certain extent, and there is certainly some variance from teacher to teacher and circumstance to circumstance. Here I write about both how Lecoq taught the exercises and how I have experienced them as both a student and teacher of them.

a similar lying position. Clearly these negations are not mechanical such as, “don’t stand,” but rather, are based on the imagery that the actor is creating “you were already there, you did not wake up.” Furthermore Lecoq instructors rarely tell students to try an exercise. Instead, they set up an exercise and invite volunteers by asking something like, “who would like to try?” (Wright 72)<sup>3</sup>. Wright explains how, on the one hand, this approach might give the impression to students that there is a correct answer and they have to find it. In my practice as an instructor, I would suggest that there is a certain range of responses that I am looking for, appropriate to the mode of the exercise. In this case, the mode is neutral mask work. That range, rather than being a set of “correct” answers are keys into what those exercises are trying to inspire in the student. In this neutral mask exercise, one of the things I look for in this range is for the actor to tell the story of the prompt clearly, simply, and without any particular embellishment. This simplicity is inspired by the design of the neutral mask itself and what it can engender in the actor. In class, Lecoq used say, “anything is possible but not anything goes.”<sup>4</sup> What does not “go,” as it were, are things outside of the particular frame of the exercise. Those responses, such as waggling fingers, are not “bad,” and could work in some other circumstance. This approach teaches students to search for answers themselves within certain constraints, rather than finding the answer in a copy of what the teacher does.

Wright suggests that sometimes Lecoq knew what he wanted of his students, and sometimes he did not, but he used the approach to “manipulate creative energy” and create “urgency”(73). In either case, long-term use of the approach relieves the

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<sup>3</sup> I have witnessed and experienced a certain relativity to this approach. In my teaching in Singapore, where my students are often encouraged to be “correct,” I have to modify it. In some classes, if I ask students to try, no one will – they are unsure of the “correct” answer and they are more afraid of getting it “wrong” than experimenting with something.

<sup>4</sup> As often recalled to me by one of my Lecoq teachers, Amy Russell.

students of the burden of correctness, and instills in them a habit of experimentation. Wright points to another result – the understanding that theatrical choices are validated through pragmatism, rather than theoretical principle:

Lecoq does not tell his students what he thinks is ‘right’ but rather establishes unspoken criteria for what he regards as effective. He leaves the students to voice the criteria for themselves. In refusing to tell them what to do and only commenting on what they have done he separates himself from discussion in order to focus attention on what is being created on stage. Questions of meaning or interpretation are not his concern. He is not interested [sic] what his students ‘write’ so long as what they do write is clear and effective theatre.” (73)

This process teaches the actor how to search for an answer that *works* – one that suits the context, rather than a unique, “correct” one.

In applying the term ‘*via negativa*’ to Lecoq’s pedagogy, scholar Simon Murray explains how, by using the term ‘*via negativa*’ Wright is echoing the way that Polish theatre artist Jerzy Grotowski first applied this philosophical and theological term to the theatre. For Grotowski, “the education of the actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something...ours then is a **via negativa** [bold in original]– not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks” (16). Lecoq also talks about “blocks” in his pedagogy “I am only there to place obstacles in your path, so that you can better find your way around them” (Lecoq x). In Lecoq pedagogy, he himself, as the instructor, *puts* “blocks” in the way of the actors so that they may undergo a process of negotiating those obstacles and therefore developing themselves. For Grotowski, the obstacles are intrinsic features of the untrained actor; for Lecoq, they are pedagogical devices external to the actor. This demonstrates a difference in the

purpose of negation between these theatre teachers. While I think that *via negativa* helps us to begin to come to terms with a non-affirmative approach of Lecoq's, the notion of "satisficing" takes us much further into understanding its purpose. By looking to the notion of "satisficing," a term embraced by enactivism, we can see more about just how Lecoq's pedagogical process is orienting the actor.

"Satisficing," a term used by Herbert Simon (1955), has been used in enactive evolution to pose an alternative to a traditional understanding of Darwin's notion of natural selection (Thompson 207). Natural selection often conjures up the phrase "survival of the fittest." In a colloquial understanding of the concept, the strongest traits are carried on into the genetic future by virtue of their optimality. In other words, evolution selects the very best traits and passes only those on. Satisficing, on the other hand suggests that decisions can be made based on *viability* instead of optimality. That is to say instead of making choices based on the highest standard – what is best, decisions are made on the lowest standard – what works. With respect to enactive evolution then, natural selection is not "survival of the fittest" but "survival of the just good enough so the species does not die out."

Enactivist Evan Thompson explains how evolution is at base, one manifestation of a developmental system. According to Thompson, viability suggests that "the behavior of the system is characterized by a set of possible trajectories rather than by a unique and optimal one. The task of the system is to stay within the zone of viability" (207). This highlights how a system is oriented in a very pragmatic way, and that behavior can come in a multiplicity of forms so long as they meet the minimum criteria. Thompson then goes on to explain how developmental systems are made up of a series of autonomous networks (207). Autonomy, as central to the enactive perspective explains how a network only in relation to its environment, with



a certain operational closure (207). This closure, far from disconnecting it from the environment, simply demarcates the process and needs of that network as it exists dynamically in time. These networks prioritize sustaining their own existence, so they have to be flexible in the face of both uncertainty and instability. The key to their viability then is in finding ways to successfully (not optimally) manage subject-environmental couplings. This is to say that network behavior is always contextual and co-determined.

To apply these ideas to Lecoq pedagogy, I take the actor-creator (the ideal and product of Lecoq training) as a developmental system and suggest that any particular exercise is a network. The goal for actor-creator as a system is the ability to become sensitive to and shape the actor-environment coupling, or in other words – agency. In theatrical terms, this agency is the ability to make successful theatrical choices within a very specific context. Here context includes all elements of the performance environment including audience and style. Lecoq suggests that he is preparing actor-creators for the “theatre of the future” (Lecoq 162). That is to say, he is preparing actors for contexts that do not yet exist. Therefore there is a necessary uncertainty that the actor-creator will need to be equipped to face. Lecoq’s negationary exercises teach the actor that theatrical problems are problems of contextual coupling. Furthermore, they teach the actor to solve through satisficing – how to search for viable options and make theatrical choices in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. Key to the lesson is that the actor makes choices *through* the structural coupling, not in spite of it. This flies in the face, to a certain extent, of mainstream naturalist/realist theatrical approaches where the actor needs to learn how to behave on stage as if the audience was not there – in effect training herself to ignore the audience. The exercises provide operational closure in the way that the instructor proposes themes and directs

negationary commentary. This recall's Lecoq's frequent comment that "everything is possible but not anything goes."<sup>5</sup> In this light, this phrase is not necessarily a dictum about correct incorrect, or stylistic choices. Rather it reflects the necessary operational closure of a network – be it of an exercise or a particular theatrical performance. Just like the maintenance of network viability, theatrical networks must have borders. And the actor must learn how to maintain them for theatrical viability – which is the kind of agency that Lecoq's exercises teach the actor to take up. Theatrical viability can then be understood as the internal coherency of a particular piece.

## Conclusion

The neutral mask exercises, as networks, guide the actor to discover the following key tenets for the development of Lecoq's actor creator: that the actor can be an agent and not just an interpreter; that viable choices are made through an openness and sensitivity new contexts; and that clarity of communication between the actor and audience is key to the viability of the network. The neutral mask in particular induces the actor to develop a communicative baseline from which theatre artists can depart to work in a wide range of styles. Through satisficing, these exercises teach the actor that there is not one optimal answer to a creative question. But rather that there is a range of answers that "work," depending on the context, and provokes the actor to become sensitized to the changing contours of that very context. It is in this way that Lecoq's negationary pedagogical approach, or satisficing, takes up the actor's body to show them how to bring forth theatrical worlds.

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<sup>5</sup> "Tout est possible mais pas n'importe quoi," as recalled and translated into English by Amy Russell.

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