Jacques Lecoq’s notion of the ‘Universal Poetic Sense’ infers a timeless dimension to his work, a connection with art since forever, beyond transitory tendencies. For Lecoq, it refers to the universal character present in all phenomena of life that permeates the vast variety of manifestations, both in life and in our bodies. It is based on the idea that all humans share a sensibility to this abstract dimension made of colours, shapes, matters, sounds and movements. He used this term in order to express his idea of the immutable essence of any thing that differentiates it from everything else. Once we identify and embody this dimension of movement within all existing things, we express it in our own way. This process can be recognised both in Marcel Jousse’s concept of mimism present in all human beings, and in Gaston Bachelard’s idea of the material imagination, which implies a concrete creation.

The focus of this study is to examine the influence of some of Bachelard’s and Jousse’s notions on Lecoq’s concept of the Universal Poetic Sense, especially concerning some of the practices developed during the first year of his school. Lecoq wouldn’t go into deep considerations about these authors, faithful to his belief that students should study the concepts involved only after finishing the course, thus prioritizing the practical experience. Even so, he would sometimes mention them in class, as registered in his book Le Corps Poétique. Both the philosopher and the anthropologist, respectively, have a vast and complex body of work, which will be addressed here in a very objective way by focusing mainly on aspects that can illuminate the understanding of Lecoq’s vision of art and theatre.

Concerning the universal sense, one example monsieur Lecoq would frequently use was trees. Although trees have different characteristics, with countless kinds of species, sizes, shapes and colours, there is something that makes us recognise all of them as a tree, living or dead. We recognise the tree’s permanent identity, independent of the culture and beliefs related to it, in the same way that colours, lights and shapes carry something deep inside that makes us identify what they are, each with their particular dynamics. There are countless characteristics that can be observed in each animal, element, matter and artistic expression, in everything that surrounds us. Thus, the observation of nature is one of the key points of Lecoq’s pedagogy. The rigorous technique of the physical practice is combined with the poetical intention that feeds the artistic creation.
The dynamics underlying my teaching are those of the relationship between rhythm, space and force. The laws of movement have to be understood on the basis of the human body in motion: balance, disequilibrium, opposition, alternation, compensation, action, reaction. [..] The laws of movement govern all theatrical situations.

(Lecoq, 1997: 32)

At Lecoq’s school, the work starts with the muscles of the body synchronizing with the different dynamics within each element, matter, colour and animal. Students try and contact the subjacent link to all things, at the biological and physical levels as well as the levels related to psychic, emotional and energetic aspects. The contact with the deepest layers of nature, where all different manifestations are interconnected, is developed through physical exercises that require the students to identify their specific dynamics: how things move and how this can be transposed to the body and to the scene. This practice aims at enriching the capacity for expression of the artist with other possibilities of movement and with a permanent source of inspiration. It should also contribute to eliminating automatic ways of acting that Lecoq would compare to parasites learned from previous behaviour patterns.

According to Lecoq (Roy & Carasso, 1999), he used the word ‘poetic’ to drive our attention to things that only poetry can define: that which is beyond words, invisible, indefinable. In this way, he sought to explore the poetic dimension beyond the appearance of things. In relation to poiesis, the idea of taking a certain model or paradigm is essential; it guides the work of the artist. As pointed out by Dantas (1999: 42), poetics, in art, is the collection of references that we artists bring, consciously or unconsciously, to produce our work; it is the ideas, perceptions and understandings that will orientate the conception and realisation of our productions. The poetics is the mark of the artist, our trait, the way we use the techniques. In this sense, Lecoq’s notion of poetics also can be understood as the way each student will find their own personal creation, their personal poetic body.

In order to create, we need our imagination, which provides the freedom of thought, the possibility of taking some distance from the objective world and imagining other ways of social and individual existence. Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) considers the role of imagination and creativity as a crucial element within scientific practice. He defends the existence of a material and dynamic objectivity of our poetic knowledge of the world, and therefore the imagination, as something essentially open and evasive that, together with our will, becomes the power of creation. For Bachelard (2001: 1), the imagination is not the capacity of forming images, but deforming the images given by the perception. It is a question of freeing yourself from the first images and transforming, changing and modifying matter.

Bachelard (1989: 2) distinguishes two kinds of imagination: the ‘formal’, which comes from images of shapes, and the ‘material’, which is related to images directly applied to matter. The ‘formal’ can reproduce or evoke images in the mind of objects known from previous experiences. The ‘material’ produces, creates; it’s the type of imagination that invents new images even without having known them, like the formulation of a hypothesis never before thought of. One is descriptive and the other is creative, although one doesn’t exclude the other; they both meet at the moment of production.

The ‘formal’ imagination is centred in the sight and results in the constant exercise of abstraction, leaving humans as mere spectators of the world around them in a passive way. Bachelard criticises the hegemony of sight over the other senses in Western philosophy, for he believes that a philosophy that sees with the eyes is still attached to the conception of
contemplating, which comes from the traditional way of understanding imagination as a subaltern faculty that depends on an object to be copied.

The ‘material’ imagination differs from the ‘formal’ presupposing an action, with humans intervening actively in the matter as creators, as craftspeople, as manipulators that act in a concrete and concretizing manner. Bachelard confronts this passive ocular philosophy with one that is active and subordinated to the hand, acting upon matter in order to transform it. He refers to the operative and creative work of humans facing the resistance of the matter, such as a ceramist moulding a pot.

Bachelard defends the autonomy of the creative imagination which can originate new connections, new combinations of signs, independently of the world perceived only through the senses. Therefore, the ‘material’ imagination is the capacity of forming images beyond reality. The materiality of the images derive from an organic and elemental inspiration, showing the material objectivity of our poetical dwelling in the world, never forgetting the dynamics implicit in their constitutional elements. Far from the seduction of the imagination of the forms, the ‘material’ imagination thinks, dreams and lives, materializes the imaginary. He proposes that we perceive the image as a plant that needs earth and air, substance and form, rooting and impulse from the matter, so that we develop an ‘open imagination’ (Bachelard, 1989: 2). The ‘material’ imagination defies the resistance and the concrete forces, a direct contact between the world’s materiality in a dynamic and transforming attitude resulting from the direct work of the hand over matter.

Considering the work within the perspective of theatre, we can substitute this understanding of the hand with the whole body. The actor is the matter to be worked. We transform our bodies according to our imagination, based on the observation that goes beyond the visual, including the dynamics of things and the common poetical foundation that Lecoq refers to.4

Even by examining just a small part of the extensive legacy of Bachelard’s studies, we can establish quite a few relationships between Bachelard’s thoughts and Lecoq’s works. One relevant point is the study of the elements and their association with specific emotions (Lecoq, 1997: 54). Bachelard establishes connections between the material imagination and the four great cosmic worlds – fire, air, earth and water – which relate to an archaic human feeling, a primordial organic reality, a fundamental oneiric temper. The canon of the four elements is one of the most persistent in Western culture, an inexhaustible source for creators. The ‘material’ imagination implies an engagement of the body with the concreteness of things. Just as we may say that deep down, life is chemical, the imagination is, above all, material. At Lecoq’s school, the work with the elements establishes the basis for the practice with different themes in the first year: matter or materials, colours, lights, animals and the arts (music, poetry and painting), which later can become physical possibilities for building human characters.

Regarding the emotions, Bachelard proposes associations between the elements and the kinds of reveries that command passions and beliefs. Fire and its material imagination produce the poetical temper of the igneous psyche, such as rage or fury; air comes with the aerial psyche, the dream of flying; earth comes with the fixed, firm psyche; and water comes with the malleable, penetrating psyche, to give some examples. Comparing working with these elements with the work of a baker, Bachelard suggests we should try different combinations to find the right balance, trying different consistencies like a poet working with imaginary mixtures towards the beauty of forms.

When working with water, for example, we may start with seawater, passing on to a river, a waterfall, a lake. It all starts with perceiving the inner dynamics of the different waters we
can think of, and evoking the memory of each of them with the movement of the body. The challenge is to transpose the visual and perceptive memory into kinetics. We can do the same with the other elements: earth (mud, sand, drought, etc.); fire (matches, bonfire, candles, etc.); and air (breeze, stormy wind, blowing a balloon, etc.). It’s a question of working with their specificities, perceiving the different dynamics and bringing them to the body, trying to move like these elements and materials. This is a process designed to enlarge the possibilities of movements, and consequently to expand the imaginative capacity of the actor.

Even though Lecoq (1997: 54) would directly refer only to Bachelard’s ‘material’ imagination, the practice at his school seems to involve also the ‘formal’ one. The ‘formal’ imagination is related to visual observation and to form through the practice of the Twenty Movements; for example, the ‘material’ imagination is practiced through improvisation exercises based on the different themes mentioned above. More than that, there’s a constant reference to the internal ‘motor’, when the professor would incite the students to find the propelling forces in the movement, the inner impulse that makes us move (which could also be extended to the rhythm of the scene and of the whole performance). Thus, this approach deals with internal dynamics, internal mime, internal mimesis or mimism, which is the concept that Jousse created, related to the imitation of the internal sense of whatever moves around us.

An artist’s talent and art consists in finding in three lines the essence of whatever he is painting. At our school we try to recognise elements in life that take place before acting them out, a recognition of live things through the body, through mimism. In this manner we get to know trees, the rhythm of the sea, colours, space and people, all that is alive and moves which is infinite.

(Lecoq in Leabhart, 1989: 96)

The French anthropologist Marcel Jousse (1886–1961) named the science that studies the role of gesture and rhythm in the human’s processes of cognition, memory and expression as the ‘Anthropology of the Gesture’. Gesture, for Jousse (1974: 58), embraces all that can be registered by the senses. Thinking is nothing but the awareness of the registered gestures, their implications, imbrications, transpositions, inhibitions. Thoughts and actions are gestural, one microscopic and the other macroscopic. This science embraces many other disciplines, such as pedagogy, psychology, linguistics, anthropology and religion, for example, through the discovery of some fundamental laws that command all communicative mechanisms of mankind – a group Jousse would refer to as ‘Anthropos’. The main law among all of these is that of mimism, which has been in the origin of all processes since the formation of words, thoughts or logical action in different ethnical sources.

For Jousse (1974: 35), Anthropology of Gesture is the same as Anthropology of Mimism. It refers to the search for the internal dynamic of the senses through a mechanism in which there is first a moment of absorption of what is outside, and second an instance when the individual remakes what he or she has perceived, expressing it in his or her own way. The reproduction or the repetition can be inhibited, but it’s certain that whatever it was the individual had perceived is kept recorded, ready to be reproduced. This knowledge is kept impressed in us; it is intelligent, it expresses thought, and it is memorized within our whole body. According to Jousse, human expression happens first with the body in its totality; therefore, the true body expression doesn’t consist of exercising arms and legs, but in exercising the whole body to express the reality that each individual carries within.
Bachelard, Jousse and Lecoq

Mimism is the specific force of the Anthropos, the foundation of human expression, innate and spontaneous, existing in all of us. The Anthropos is made in such a way that we perceive through receptive mechanisms of absorption all that moves, all that ‘plays’ around us, which will be later expressed in our own way in a mechanism Jousse called ‘replay’. This tendency makes a child spontaneously ‘replay’ (remake) the sounds, movements and gestures of his or her own universe. He refers to this absorption as intussusception, which is something that reaches as deep as the internal tissues of the body, an invagination, the transformation and incorporation of the forming elements of our guts.

Through his anthropological studies, Jousse (1974: 8) came to the understanding that there are three great permanent and universal laws that rule the development of languages, mentalities, civilizations and cultures throughout millenniums and particular ethnical realities: Rhythm-Mimism, Bilateralism and Formulism (Jousse, 1974: 15–21).

Rhythm-Mimism is the starting point of Jousse’s research, in which he further developed Aristotle’s suggestion that humans are the animal that imitates the most. He observed the tendency of imitating in the human being, of spontaneously miming actions and attitudes of all beings around us, even inanimate ones, through the process of absorbing and expressing, remaking, ‘replaying’: ‘The replay is microscopic in thoughts, macroscopic in actions’ (Jousse, 1974: 16). He formulated the law of ‘universal inter-action’ believing that, in the universe, everything is ‘actions that act over other actions’ in uncountable interactions that we receive and register as elementary gestures. They happen in an imbricated, triphasic way: agent – acting – action. These unconscious interactions are absorbed by all the fibres of our bodies, and will later be ‘replayed’ with our whole being through mime or speech (which he also considers gesture).

Bilateralism refers to the way we perceive with all our body. It is the relationship between body and space within all three dimensions – front/back, right/left, up/down – with the body being in the middle of them all, in balance. Formulism is the biological tendency to stereotype human gestures, which generates a kind of framework that connects generations, constituting a culture’s mentalities and attitudes. Gestures are the muscular and sound structures necessary to make interactions happen.

Just as with Bachelard’s studies, Jousse’s are also vast and complex. Nevertheless, mimism was always at the centre of his thoughts, and that’s the main point of connection with Lecoq’s teachings. When asked about the use of mime, Lecoq always stated that he would rather use the term ‘mimism’, for it had a broader sense, closer to his view of art and theatre. He would explain the difference between mimetism and mimism, the first being the representation of a form and the latter being the expression of the internal dynamic of the sense (Lecoq, 1997: 33). So, we can here identify the process of absorbing (intussusceptionating) and ‘replaying’ with the whole body. He would constantly call the student’s attention to observing the surroundings, with its rhythms, lights, shapes, lines, and the essence of the different manifestations, alerting the student to the Universal Poetic Sense in everything.

Lecoq used the ideas of both ‘replay’ and ‘play’ in very specific ways. He would first approach improvisations with the idea of a silent, psychological ‘replay’. Lecoq (1997: 41) considered ‘replaying’ to be the simplest way of re-establishing life’s phenomena. His pedagogy was strongly devoted to having students understand this law. The replay must be without transpositions or exaggerations, as faithful as possible to reality. In the school’s first-year improvisation classes, for example, we would start with replaying ‘A Day in a Village’. At the beginning, all is quiet, people are sleeping; gradually, the different people awake and engage with their schedules and professions, their routines, the pace of early morning, noon,
afternoon, night, and the return back to sleep. Using the entire room, the whole group would play together, concerned only with the rhythms, the space, the remaking of life itself. The scene is 'replayed' without conflicts or characters, just human relationships.

For Lecoq (1997: 41), ‘playing’ [acting] comes later, when we face an audience and intentionally imprint a theatrical dimension with intention, rhythm, measure, space, according to our own will: our poetics. This matches the description of Bachelard’s material imagination. Even though it refers to the body in space, it’s still an object with a willingly given form. Thus, ‘playing’ implies our poetics, our personal touch, the imagination acting concretely through the artist. ‘Replaying’ can be closer or farther from playing, with the most audacious transpositions, but it should never forget its anchor in reality.

Neither Jousse’s nor Bachelard’s studies were strictly focused on art. Still, we can clearly identify a relationship between mimism, Bachelard’s imagination, and Lecoq’s approach to theatre. They all refer to the capacity of the artist to reproduce from and create in response to the artist’s surroundings. Jousse’s concept is broader than Bachelard’s, for he considered ‘all operations of spirit, such as memory, imagination, reasoning, etc., conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or directed, exact or combined, transposed or sublimed, nothing but ‘replays’: the anthropological mechanism is always the same’ (Jousse, 1974: 16). Bachelard’s ‘material imagination’, on the other hand, specifies the process of perceiving the matter things are made of, taking into account their dynamics and substance, in order to create, deform, transform, imprint your own will and act upon it in a concrete and concretizing way. When the Anthropos expresses himself or herself through ‘replaying’, he/she is making associations with what was previously absorbed in a unique and personal way, and characterizing, therefore, an act of creation – an imaginative action, as Bachelard would say.

Thus, apparently they are procedures that fit together, that are equivalent, complementary and, in association with one another, they embrace the depth of Lecoq’s pedagogy based on the Universal Poetic Sense. This association is in accordance with one of the basic principles that underpins Lecoq’s practice: the observation of nature. During the theatre training, while developing the attention, the perception and the absorption of the surroundings, the actor also develops his or her natural capacity of replaying and playing, broadening the borders of his or her imagination – both formal and material – towards an aesthetical construction. Such a process can therefore be taken as a technique, something that can be learned and developed with experience. It is a way of developing the imagination of the actor through the body.

Lecoq’s approach uses examples based on the observation of nature’s manifestations, on the simple daily things of life. Concrete metaphors like, for example, the sea waves hitting the shore, the wind bouncing the trees, the anemones deep in the ocean, a rush hour in a city. The teacher would sometimes use poetical metaphors very much in the way Bachelard does, such as when he writes:

> It could be said that the furious wind is the symbol of pure anger, of anger with neither object nor pretext. [. . .] Tempests without preparation, physical tragedies without cause. [. . .] The wind threatens and howls but it only takes on a shape when it meets dust: once visible it becomes nothing but a misery [. . .].

(Bachelard in Lecoq, 1997: 54, author’s translation)

When improvising, we may start with moving as air, then the wind in its many dynamic possibilities. We would then transpose this rhythm to some common actions that a character would do, like sitting, scratching the head, or biting the nails, for example, which will come out with
an intensity that can reveal an emotional state. It is thus through the 'transference method' (Lecoq, 1997: 55) that characters are built, starting with the movement of the body according to whatever dynamic is extracted from nature, which will gradually become personalized, humanized. This process can also be used the other way around, starting from any routine action and gradually imprinting different dynamics to access a desired state of character. That is one of the main characteristics of Lecoq’s pedagogy, and one which avoids a psychological construction of the character by using these techniques directly related to movement instead. And this is why understanding the deep connection with nature is so important, for it is not merely a matter of imitation, but it should come instead from that intusseption mentioned by Jousse, as well as the detailed observation of matter that Bachelard advocates.

Other themes present in Lecoq’s pedagogy, like the animals, colours and the arts, also follow the same logic of capturing the internal dynamics and transposing them to the body and to the scene. These rhythms, sensations and feelings become part of the theatre artist’s core sensibility, and it is from there that the perceptions and stimuli come out to express such forces through movement, going beyond mere physical impressions. We create, for instance, another sea. Not the real and concrete one, nor a semiotically referenced one, but a poetic sea, played with this ‘something else’ that belongs only to that artist and that defines his or her own style, as Lecoq (1987: 96) would ratify.

The Universal Poetic Sense involves all this comprehension of science and art. Acting is, in this sense, the craft of doing, constructing, shaping and expressing oneself, together with one’s perception of nature in its deepest sense. It is something that has always been part of artistic work, the abstract subjacent dimension that we dive into when we decide to become artists. In Lecoq’s pedagogy, we find this a concern that goes beyond physical preparation to reach the very basis of the art of theatre, the connection with the diversity of the manifestations of nature and human beings.

Although Lecoq is sometimes criticised as being romantic and old-fashioned in using the term ‘universal’, I find that an understanding of his relationship with the ideas of Bachelard and Jousse helps to clarify his use of nature as a constant reference point for the theatrical work. Some of the possible tensions and paradoxes mentioned by Murray (2003: 155–157) can be dissolved when we establish connections with philosophy, science, and theatre history and practice itself, allowing contact with this subjacent layer of his contribution to the arts in a broader sense. That is why, aligned with the major development of the twentieth-century theatre, Lecoq’s teachings still work as a source of inspiration for performing arts in our days.

Notes

1 The original term in French, ‘Fond Poétique commun’, means a common poetical foundation. The translation used here is from David Bradby’s English version in Lecoq (2001).
3 Lecoq constantly mentioned that his school was not just for actors, but also for directors, set designers, authors, etc. (Lecoq, 1997: 27).
4 This is the main theme of the author’s doctoral degree thesis (Sachs, 2013).
5 The original in French is rejeu.
6 ‘Rejeu’ in French doesn’t have the idea of ‘repeating’ as the word in English may suggest, but rather ‘put something in game’, ‘make it play’, ‘make it act’.
7 Another point of confluence is the use of some of Jousse’s neologisms, such as ‘mimodrame’ and ‘mimage’, for example (Jousse, 1974).
9 Never forgetting that Lecoq doesn’t use this word in French.
References


