Mime was more than a theatrical tool for Jacques Lecoq; it was the primary means by which we learn about the world: ‘the act of mime is a fundamental human act, a childhood act: children mime the world in order to get to know it and to prepare themselves to live in it’ (Lecoq et al., 1997: 33).\(^1\) Lecoq believed that humans constantly mimed their social and physical surroundings as a means of learning about them; all expression and relations with the world were based in the acquisition of worldly traces and images by the moving body. According to this understanding, shared by thinkers from Aristotle onward, human beings appropriate gestures from their caregivers and their environment through mime, literally incorporating themselves into the worlds described and made for them by those with greater power or authority.

Lecoq separated mime from pantomime, with the latter being the indication of imagined objects and material exterior to the performer’s body and the former being the expression of objects and materials through the performer’s body. The pantomime’s gestures took the place of words and denoted the influence of an absent object separate from the body. For example, the pantomime indicates a glass of water by cupping a hand. In contrast, the mime’s gestures are those of an object: the mime performs the glass of water with the entire body. Whereas mime concerns itself with porous bodies taking on their environments, pantomime addresses itself to the forms of things, and involves the depiction of objects’ limits as they met with a body’s. This distinction begins to explain the importance of Lecoq’s approach to mimesis not only for his own pedagogy, but also in the genealogy of continental thinkers grappling with questions of empathy and identity. As _Le Théâtre du Geste_ (1987) makes abundantly clear, Lecoq’s influences were varied and reached well beyond the realm of performance. In this chapter, I consider the influence and resonance of three influential French thinkers in Lecoq’s approach to mime and to space.

Just as he distinguished between pantomime and mime, Lecoq also contrasted the act of miming a sense of place with miming its form – a distinction he borrowed, and altered, from anthropologist Marcel Jousse.\(^2\) Jousse follows Aristotle’s belief in the instructional use of imitation, but he urges a difference between ‘mimétisme’, ‘imitation’, and what he terms ‘mimisme’. For Jousse, mimétisme refers to the involuntary assumption of an exterior form matching an outside stimulus; mimisme describes the spontaneous and involuntary action of taking the ‘outside’ world within ourselves and appropriating its gestures; and ‘imitation’ refers to the ‘intentional mastery of the spontaneous mechanisms of mimisme’ (Jousse, 1974: 45–59).\(^3\) The
two central qualities in these processes are will and form, respectively: with mimétisme and mimisme, mime is involuntary and refers to exterior and interior form; with mimisme and imitation, mime refers to interior form and movement, but in the former case it is not willed and in the latter it is. Jousse additionally asserted that objects contained 'characteristic gestures' that reverberated in the human body, thereby opening the body to an understanding of the object (Jousse, 1974: 54–55). Through imitation, we might wrest control over processes of mimisme and use them to communicate in a form of expression Jousse contrasted to spoken language by coining the term mimage (Jousse, 1974: 54).

Lecoq did not distinguish between imitation and mimisme, writing of the latter as a voluntary action; but his insistence on a mime of form and a mime du fond (‘fundamental mime’) of internal sense speaks to the distinction between mimétisme and mimisme written about by Jousse (Lecoq et al., 1997: 33). Lecoq’s concern was less with whether mimétisme was voluntary or not than whether the mime involved exterior form or an interior movement revealed as a shared investment between the body and the world. Lecoq described this investment as le geste sous le geste, the gesture below the gesture: ‘this is made by bodily impressions that inspire the body’s movement’ (Lecoq, 1974: 279).4 As Morgane Bourhis explains, ‘Even if the attendants aren’t aware of the mimed object itself, they can still experience actions that have a “motor of play” that is perceivable in and as the actor’ (Bourhis, 1999: 27).5

It was in search of these gestures that Lecoq used mime in his pedagogy – to push students to move as elements, materials, and place, to move at the call of something other than oneself. This work began with the neutral mask, a pedagogical tool employed to help students provide themselves with a ‘state of discovery, of openness, an availability to receive’ (Lecoq et al., 1997: 49).6 It is not meant for performance. After wearing the mask, students are expected to have experienced an engaged, physical curiosity for the world uninflected by personal opinion. Its central movement dynamic is mime, in which students corporealize what they encounter: ‘I am facing the sea, watching it, breathing it. My breath moulds itself to the movement of the waves and gradually the picture shifts’ (Lecoq et al., 1997: 53).7 Although Lecoq positions the perception of the sea as a visual act (‘the picture shifts’), note that this results from the shared sensation of breath, linking vision with touch and proprioception as the body becomes aware of its similarities to the acoustic and visual rhythm of the waves. Elsewhere, Lecoq uses Jousse’s neologism mimage to refer to this process, calling it the expression of ‘hidden gestures, emotions, underlying state of a character’, as well as the expression through movement of ‘that which does not have an image’ (Lecoq, 1987: 113–114).

The elements (earth, fire, air, water) certainly have images, but Lecoq’s approach to them demonstrates how he approached ‘the gesture under the gesture’. After working on miming the different elements, he would ask students to perform movement phrases in the manner of an element. Using water in a movement tends to remove its lines and emphasize undulation; rendering a movement more like air removes undulation and emphasizes lightness and shifts of direction and rhythm. Similarly, when playing a role, actors can incorporate qualities of elements into the work, trying a scene ‘more like earth’ or ‘more like water’. Playing a character ‘with fire’ would involve transposing fire’s need to constantly consume, its reaching out in all directions for what sustains it, either in grand, raging gestures, or feeble, guttering ones. Audience members may not be able to identify the elements, but neither are they expected to. Hopefully, however, they will grasp a particular kind of movement, a particular kind of space unlike their own and worth following.

Lecoq followed Jousse and Gaston Bachelard (whose influence on Lecoq is the subject of another chapter in this volume) in reversing a dynamic suggested by German empathy theory. This enormously influential strain of thought arose from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
art and architecture theory that sought to explain how we perceive, and then how we take pleasure from, form (Mallgrave and Ikonomou, 1994). The term ‘empathy’ was the English translation of Robert Vischer’s neologism *Einfühlung*, literally translated as ‘in-feeling’ or ‘feeling-into’. The translator worked from the Greek root *empatheia*, ‘which signifies the ability to project one’s emotions into an object of thought’ (Krasner, 2006: 71 n.64). Vischer described this as the experience of viewers in the grip of the human ‘pantheistic urge for union with the world’ projecting their souls ‘into’ phenomena and tracing them from the inside out (Vischer, 1994: 106, 108–109).8

According to Vischer, *Einfühlung* enacts a curious fusion of subject and object: through an identification with the form of the object, the viewing subject occupies it from within, thus transforming the subject-object relation into a subject-subject relation (Vischer, 1994: 103). Of course, the two ‘subjects’ here are the same, namely, the initial viewer. Thus, while viewers are drawn as physical beings to phenomena by their presumed resemblance to a human situation, as well as by the human desire to understand one’s surroundings, viewers simultaneously achieve and enact this resemblance and desire by feeling themselves from ‘inside’ the phenomenon encountered. Therefore, phenomena are in a sense occupied and appropriated by their viewers.

By keeping the viewer’s identity intact, the empathy theorists allowed for the suppression of difference even as they sought to analyze how viewers responded to what they perceived. These thinkers essentially anthropomorphized phenomena, installing imagined universal human qualities in them that could then be recognized and claimed by viewing subjects who essentially recognized themselves. Thus, as David Krasner and Dermot Moran note, thinking on empathy required primarily knowledge of self (Krasner, 2006: 267; Moran, 2004: 271–274). Art historian Juliet Koss goes further and emphasizes that for the German empathy theorists, the subject of *Einfühlung* ‘was implicitly a man of property’ viewing art ‘within the confines of a relatively private realm’, namely in the museum or private gallery (Koss, 2006: 144). In other words, empathy was not for everyone.

Lecoq, working from Jousse and Bachelard, broke from this tradition and proposed that when students mimed an object, far from the object being overtaken by the students, the object altered the student. By observing closely the way a particular tree accommodates and resists the wind and attempting to imitate this movement, or observing the way another person walks and attempting to imitate their gait, students are opened to new relations with their surroundings. It opens them to new spaces without claiming that these spaces belong to the movers. Mime stages an encounter and a transformation, not an appropriation. The environment alters the neutral mask rather than a student pretending to master the mimicked object. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing about the role of mimicry in child development, notes: ‘Mimesis is the ensnaring of me by the other, the invasion of me by the other; it is that attitude whereby I assume the gestures, the conducts, the favored way of doing things of those whom I confront’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 145–146).9 This does not mean that one becomes another, but instead that other habits displace our own. These habits are not another’s, they are of the other, a derivative. Similarly, Lecoq insisted that when he spoke of identifying with another, ‘we do not mean total identification, which would be worrying, but playing at identification’ (Lecoq et al., 1997: 53). Identification makes play — jeu — impossible because it traps the actor rather than allowing room for improvisation and discovery. Play requires distance — from oneself, from what one mimes, from others.10

Recognizing the tight bond between mimesis and play reflects how Lecoq’s approach to mimicry drew not only from Jousse, but also from theorist Roger Caillois, whose writing about space and play specifically addressed the consequences of attempting to appear like
another. In 1935, Caillois published his first work on animal mimicry, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, and he would continue to wrestle with this phenomena for the following 28 years. In his research, Caillois found a disturbing paradox: many of the insects he observed had developed complex means for mimicking their surroundings, and yet this labor seemed not to have accomplished its supposedly primary goal of protecting the insects from their predators. Instead, these insects could regularly be found in their predators’ stomachs.

As Caillois discovered, those insects that sought to blend into their environment through imitation of color, pattern, and behavior could only benefit from their subterfuge if they remained still. In most cases, movement would distinguish them from their environments, rendering their disguises useless, because those predators that hunt by sight look for moving prey. If simply arresting their movement would accomplish the same goal, these species needn’t have developed extensive camouflage. In addition, Caillois found that, in fact, most of their predators did not hunt by sight but by smell, further throwing into question the adaptive thesis of mimicry (whereby the camouflage is meant to have an evolutionary purpose in protecting the species) (Caillois, 1963: 45–46, 54).

If animal mimicry could not be ascribed to a defensive purpose, perhaps its goal could not be determined on the basis of utility. In his early work, Caillois proposed that the insects experienced an urge of ‘assimilation to the surroundings [. . .] a real temptation’ (Caillois, 1984: 27–28). As such, the insects were victims of ‘legendary psychasthenia’, a pathology that removed a subject’s ‘feeling of personality, considered as the organism’s feeling of distinction from its surroundings’. Once the organism loses itself as ‘an origin of coordinates [. . .] literally no longer knows where to place itself’, and the organism experiences a desire to become lifeless matter (Caillois, 1984: 28). For Caillois at this point, and similar to Jousse’s mimétisme, the reflection of place does not involve any choice from the mimicking organism – the ‘temptation’ by place is absolute and annihilating, and it finds its human analogue in psychosis.

However, Caillois later repudiated his previous claims that mimicry (mimétisme) is ‘a disturbed perception of space and a tendency to return to the inanimate’, and calls this explanation ‘fantastic’ (Caillois, 1967: 62). Instead, he argues that the insect’s mimicry may be like that of humans, to whom Caillois attributes agency. In other words, he comes to qualify animal mimicry as a form of jeu, or play: ‘with one exception, mimicry presents all the characteristics of play: liberty, convention, suspension of the real, limited space and time’ (Caillois, 1967: 66–67). Of these qualities, ‘suspension of the real’ stands out because, by Caillois’ own account, mimicking insects are unquestionably and often tragically a part of the ‘real’. Caillois considered play an impulse ‘no less powerful, elemental, and widespread than the instinct of preservation or fighting for one’s life’ (Caillois, 1963: 51), and it changes the assumption of place from a malady to a game.

In terms of Lecoq’s work, especially the neutral mask, to mime or mimic place meant to play at taking on the sense of something beyond oneself. Indeed, the neutral mask embodies the two core principles of Lecoq’s teaching: play and space. As Yarrow and Frost put it, ‘for Lecoq, “play” was very much a question of developing the physical articulation of mimetic possibility’ (Frost & Yarrow, 2007: 88). Tellingly, the possible is not the known but the imagined, a hybrid of the real and what might come. With the neutral mask, mime, mimisme, imitation, these are not ways of knowing, which presupposes a stable identity comprehending an object, but ways of learning. Students under the mask do not know or dominate what is mimed, but instead open up a space of possibility in which they are altered without claiming the alteration is another. The students miming the sea do not know the sea, but they learn about themselves when they allow their ‘own’ movement to be of the sea.
Making this claim, that mimesis grants us powers of the mimed, represents one of the dangers attending the assumption that replicating form can produce knowledge. Responding to an entry in Yvonne Rainer’s journal about observing and mimicking a dancer in India, Susan Leigh Foster cautions that to conceive of literally re-performing another’s movement as a form of knowledge risks replicating a colonial project by stripping movement of ‘psychological or social frames of reference’ (Foster, 2005: 89). Foster argues that the idea of imitating the exterior form of movement requires the establishment of an ‘unmarked and pure space’ capable of obscuring the labor and values entailed with crossing it (Foster, 2005: 86, 88). Further, this space expands from a subject whose pure reception of information across space obscures its (the subject’s) interest in particular interpretations of that information. Foster’s convincing analysis of how the concept of abstract space played a part in the European colonial enterprise leaves open the possibility that our alteration by others does not need to imply mastery of another. Instead, moving as another can involve learning a manner of being different from one’s own. When students mime objects or materials or elements, they do not ‘know’ them, but they are available to spaces other than their own; these may not be ‘the’ spaces of a tree or of another person, but they are not entirely those of the student either. As Yarrow and Frost put it, these are spaces marked by possibility.

These spaces resonate with those described by another of Lecoq’s contemporaries, the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, whose analysis of human movement proceeded in much the same way as Lecoq’s. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lecoq were engaged in academic pursuits – training younger students and grappling with their own understanding of the world and how to engage it. One held posts at two of France’s premier academic institutions, and the other created his own. Both were deeply marked by their country’s experience during the two world wars: Merleau-Ponty drew on case studies of soldiers cognitively crippled in World War I in order to work from a perceived disability to formulate an ability. Lecoq trained as a physiotherapist and worked to rehabilitate paralytics and others wounded in World War II; from his experiences trying to re-teach these patients how to walk and conduct otherwise basic motor skills, he gained an appreciation of what he would later call the laws of movement. Both men understood space not as a volume but as a kind of relationship founded on possibility.

For Merleau-Ponty, space was not ‘abstract’, ‘geometrical’, or ‘Euclidean’. Only by stripping bodies and space of their particular qualities might we arrive at ‘homogenous’ or ‘isotropic’ or ‘neutral’ or ‘empty’ spaces. Spaces cannot be separated from the bodies that bring them into being: ‘there would be no space at all for me if I had no body’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 100–106). And yet, this space does not belong solely to a body because ‘it is not impressed upon the object itself, it quite clearly belongs to the perspective and not to things. [. . .] It announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 256). By this, Merleau-Ponty means that space allows things and perceivers involvement with each other rather than arriving as qualities proper to one or the other – the perspective is shared by both.

This means that we are intrinsically bound to the institution of space in a precarious balancing act between our surroundings and ourselves. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty adopts Edmund Husserl’s notion of the body as a null-point or absenting anchor (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 101–102). As a source of orientation that secures our capacities to determine the distances required for all perception, bodies become the primal relation of perception. And yet, as such, bodies themselves are obscured by virtue of their serving as a hinge between figure and ground: the body drifts away as it gives definition to other things.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty does not entirely site orientation in the body. Our bodies’ spatiality is not determined simply by their material locations as a purported center of perception,
it is determined by their abilities to act: ‘it is clearly in action that the spatiality of the body is brought into being’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 102). Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that orientation is achieved not from our bodies but through our capacities for action does not require resolving all bodies into one. Indeed, with orientation removed from ‘the’ body, it rests in action, and each body will have its own changing capacity for action. This accounts in part for how differently-abled bodies institute different orientations in the same location; whether this difference manifests as different people or the same person over time, space is linked to our bodies’ capabilities in specific situations. Rather than a set of mere coordinates, ‘situation’ involves the body as ‘a system of possible actions, a virtual body [. . .] defined by its task and situation’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 250). Thus, we can experience space both as a calling forth of our bodies and as answering their call: ‘My body is where there is something to be done’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 250).19

Merleau-Ponty called the sensation of being able to make arrangements in the future the ‘intentional arc’, and he described it as the feeling of being able to direct ourselves towards projects not yet realized (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 136). Thrown out around us, recalling our past and formulating our futures, the intentional arc confirms our situatedness while proposing changes to those situations. Merleau-Ponty leaves unsaid a principle Lecoq affirmed, namely that space requires more than the formation of our bodies, our learned ways of acting and perceiving: in order to change our situation, we need imagination.

Space is always a matter of potential as well as actuality, of what may be as well as what appears to be. Our perception of the (im)balance between the possible and actual might describe our sense of space’s different qualities. A ‘dead’ space may feel like one drained of the future possibility, while a ‘charged’ one might feel like one where the possible seems more prominent than the actual. Imagination is not contrasted with the actual or the real but inseparably involved with it. Merleau-Ponty writes about the interplay of the physical, the possible, and the imaginable in a passage that strongly echoes language used by Lecoq to describe the central work of performers:

A ‘lived’ distance binds me to things which count and exist for me, and links them to each other. [. . .] Sometimes between myself and the events there is a certain amount of play (Spielraum) which ensures that my freedom is preserved while the events do not cease to concern me.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 286)20

‘Lived distance’, space, binds us all and concerns play. Spielraum translates literally as ‘play space’, but it is usually translated as ‘elbow room’ or ‘room for maneuver’ or ‘leeway’.21 Play can articulate space – perceived possibilities for movement and action imagined both by performers and attendants. Lecoq’s notion of jeu (play) refers to a freedom instituted by an alert engagement with the constraints of possible movement. Space as Spielraum is a play-space, a space of/by/as play. Lecoq’s work explicitely valorizes and stages the transformation of a subject by an encounter with another, transformations that put students in play with possibility, in play with space.

Notes

1 My translation after David Bradby.
2 Lecoq’s English translator David Bradby, confusingly, takes the end of one of Lecoq’s paragraphs crediting Jousse for his explication of mimisme and puts it in a footnote that reads as if Bradby wrote it (Lecoq, 2000: 22).
Space and mimesis

3 ‘Imitation’ is a cognate in French, ‘mimétisme’ is usually translated as ‘mimicry’ (although this loses the sense of compulsion stressed by Jousse), and ‘mimisme’ is a neologism.


5 My translation.

6 My translation.

7 See also Lecoq (1987).

8 The term ‘viewer’ is used advisedly: Vischer and his immediate successors were concerned with aesthetic encounters and heavily emphasized the visual sense. Even August Schmarsow, who emphasized the body in movement, figured this mainly as a roving eye.

9 In Michael Taussig’s seminal work on the processes of mimesis between colonized and colonizing peoples, he notes: ‘The ability to mime, to mime well, in other words, is the capacity to Other’ (Taussig, 1993).

10 I have written elsewhere on the importance of distance in Lecoq’s concept of le jeu (Foley Sherman, 2010).


12 See also Caillois (1984).

13 Original emphasis.

14 My translation.

15 My translation.

16 My translation.

17 Foster’s recent book, Choreographing Empathy (2011), is based on this and a series of other articles situating the perception of dance in the context of historical approaches to perception.

18 Despite the risk of proposing a ‘normal’ body, this approach offers the prospect of continual surprise and depth because it refuses to take for granted habitual functioning of the body, to say nothing of the terms ‘habitual’ or ‘body’.

19 Emphasis mine.

20 The German appears in the original French, and Colin Smith has translated ‘jeu’ as ‘play’.

21 I am indebted to Dermot Moran for his kind assistance translating and explaining this term.

References


