On the floor of the main hall of L’École Internationale de Théâtre, Jacques Lecoq crumples up a thin sheet of plastic paper. Surrounded by students, he releases it and watches attentively as it instantaneously but slowly tries to spring back to its initial shape. ‘What pain’ (Quelle douleur), he tells his students. The creases of its injury are still visible, but the natural tendency of the plastic paper is to stretch itself out again, to recover its former self. ‘She says, “But, yes!”’ (Elle dit, ‘Mais, oui!’), Lecoq insists. Its movements decelerate even further as the process unfolds, until finally it strikes a crinkled, immobile pose, one that Lecoq is convinced will be followed by a fall (‘On attend une chute, eh?’ [We expect a fall, right?]). He is right; the paper falls delicately to its side and, in effect, dies. ‘Look at that, it’s beautiful, isn’t it? (Regardez ça, c’est beau, non?) I have used movements like that for tragic choruses. Nobody knew it was paper that was the motor for the movement, but one saw an immense tragedy’ (Carasso & Roy, 1999).

This brief anecdote points to a process of theatrical creation proposed by the pedagogy of the Lecoq School: first, the neutral observation of and identification with the physical world (object, material, animal, elemental); second, the actor-mime’s transposition of the object’s movements and rhythms; and third, the transformation of the actor through those transpositions. That transformation endows the actor with his or her personal style, while the object remains a tool that will support and inform the actor’s play. The actor-mime does not psychologically identify with the character he or she plays; for Lecoq, such a method is too ‘private’ or corporeally uncommunicative. The actor draws on aspects of the physical world to help him or her communicate theatrically and gain complicity with the actor’s audience and fellow actors.

Lecoq encouraged the actor’s attainment of ‘pre-cognitive’, neutral ‘non-knowing’ vis-à-vis gesture and the physical world (Felner, 1985: 148). He developed this ambition through his experience working with Jean Dasté, a pupil of the pivotal modernist innovator, Jacques Copeau (Felner, 1985).

‘In the beginning, it is necessary to demystify all that we know in order to put ourselves in a state of non-knowing, a kind of openness and availability for the rediscovery of the elemental. For now,’ Lecoq claims, ‘we no longer see what surrounds us’.

(Lecoq quoted in Keefe & Murray, 2007: 145)
Lecoq’s investment in ‘non-knowing’, the neutral investigation of the object world, is symptomatic of a broader modernist phenomenon. Modernism was marked by a desire for epistemic erasure. This impulse arose out of a crisis of Cartesian epistemology, a drive to question our ability to gain knowledge of the objective world and to represent it accurately. Modernism centered this representational problem and extensively reimagined how art should, or could, deliver reality. As Philip Weinstein (2005) has argued, modernism adopts a strategy of ‘unknowing’ that does not assume human epistemic ‘purchase on the exterior world’ and instead encourages the artist to accept his or her interrogative, unsure relationship to physical reality (Weinstein, 2005: 5). In the process, that reality no longer offers itself up unquestioningly to human imaginative appropriation, as a reflection of human consciousness. Such appropriations set up a hierarchical relationship between knowing subject and known object; some modernists, including Lecoq, attempt to invalidate that hierarchy.

These modernist preoccupations led to a branch in post-World War II French aesthetics that was invested in the project of an epistemic erasure whereby the artist respects the autonomy of the object independent of human systems of reference. That branch includes not only Lecoq, but also Alain Robbe-Grillet, whom critics generally agree is the most prominent exemplar of the avant-garde literary movement, the nouveau roman. What today are considered the theoretical manifestoes of the movement – Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Ere du soupçon* and Robbe-Grillet’s *Pour un nouveau roman* – were published in 1956 and 1963, respectively, the nascent years of the Lecoq School. Here I will investigate the points of confluence between the network of artistic propositions exemplified in my opening anecdote – so typical of Lecoq’s process – and that of the nouveau roman as represented by Robbe-Grillet.

Robbe-Grillet’s and Lecoq’s poetics involve a studied investigation of the physical reality in which we are embedded independent of human meaning and drama. Yet, they are equally cognizant of the inescapability of those meanings. Lecoq envisions the physical world as offering itself up for anthropomorphic inscriptions of human meanings and drama. But that drama must be accessed first through a representation of that world in its hard materiality from which human meaning is absent. Robbe-Grillet and Lecoq imagine an aesthetics that accounts for reality as such, independent of the imposition of drama, while acknowledging the pervasiveness of it.

Exploring these figures together will prove critically productive because they propose seemingly similar solutions to the modernist epistemological crisis of non-knowing. I will show how they both developed aesthetics that sought to respect the objective reality of the world by making art a performance and stylization of the quiddity of the things in that world. As will become evident, one consequence of these poetics is the reduction of the role of consciousness and the communication of inner, psychological experience.1 And yet, Lecoq and Robbe-Grillet arrive at remarkably different ends. Lecoq’s process emphasizes the capacity of that un-anthropomorphized world to ultimately enhance the actor’s communicative faculties and complicité, the actor’s togetherness and ‘collusion’ with the audience (Murray, 2003: 71). In this, his approach avoids the corrosive sense of estrangement that accompanies the suspicion of representation underlying Robbe-Grillet’s literature. Despite its equal commitment to the process of non-knowing, the textual excess of Robbe-Grillet’s work points up the inadequacy of language to fulfill its referential responsibilities. And paradoxically, Robbe-Grillet’s experiments with non-knowing lead him to reactivate a solipsistically subjective point of view, which prompts him to indulge in the distortive powers of human consciousness, and to thereby lapse into aesthetic alienation. An investigation of Lecoq’s pedagogy by way of Robbe-Grillet will expose the extent to which Lecoq, though beginning from similar aesthetic convictions as his literary contemporary, ultimately relies
on those convictions to create common aesthetic ground. Through those convictions, he facilitates a distinctively communal sense of artistic experience, rather than retreat into an attitude of detachment.

Like Lecoq’s pedagogy, which, as former student Beatrice Pemberton claims, is ‘quite apolitical’ (Murray, 2002: 39), the *nouveau roman* (or New Novel) appeared to be a politically indifferent literature devoted solely to formal experimentation during a time of severe political tension surrounding the Algerian war. The New Novel emerged primarily as a foil to the ‘littérature engagée’ promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his influential essay ‘Qu’est ce que la littérature?’ (1948). Although the New Novel consisted of a number of writers who published with Les Editions de Minuit, there was less an organized method governing the group’s output and more a shared distrust of the nineteenth-century realism dominated by Balzac. Though the question of the New Novel’s alleged apoliticism is not settled among critics, it remains the case that the terms in which Robbe-Grillet described his project were primarily formal and literary-historical. He claimed that with the aid of his modernist forbears, he contributed to the transformation of one of the nineteenth-century novel’s typical features, the omniscient narrator. In the previous century’s fiction, the narrator, like an ahistorical God, tells a ‘completely reconciled story, continuous, causal, univocal’; the narrator is ‘perfectly coherent and competent’ (Oppenheim, 1986: 22) and so is the world the narrator relates. Robbe-Grillet claims that with the advent of modernist literature, the narrative voice is no longer competent or coherent. Whereas in the nineteenth century, the author relates a story he or she knows to an audience that does not know it yet, ‘in the twentieth century’, Robbe-Grillet suggests, ‘the situation has developed that gave rise to the Nouveau Roman: that of an author who does not know a story recounting it to a public who does not know it either’ (Oppenheim, 1986: 24). The epistemic privilege of the omniscient narrator in the realist novel induces a sense of ‘calm and reassurance’ (Oppenheim, 1986: 23). Robbe-Grillet’s works eliminate any such sense of reassuring order.

For Robbe-Grillet, to embark on an interrogative mode of novelistic production – to write a novel that does not exercise epistemic mastery over its world or the subjects in it – entails abandoning recognizable human meanings (Meretoja, 2014). Rather, he wanted to depict reality as such, as it is prior to the establishment of human signification or narrative order. An excerpt from his theoretical writings best articulates this point:

In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own ‘meaning,’ that meaning which vainly tries to reduce them to the role of precarious tools, of a temporary and shameful fabric woven exclusively – and deliberately – by the superior human truth expressed in it, only to cast out this awkward auxiliary into immediate oblivion and darkness. No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero’s vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires. Or rather, if objects still afford a momentary prop to human passions, they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance . . . the better to show how alien they remain to man.

(Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 21–22; italics in original)

Typical realist descriptions functioned such that ‘each of the walls or the furnishings of the house represented a double of the person who inhabited it’ (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 146–147).
This unquestioned imposition of the human in the object world is what Weinstein calls realist ‘ego-logy’ (Weinstein, 2005: 30). Description in Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, appears to grant objects their autonomy from human systems of reference. In so doing, his narrators’ descriptions take note only of the visible surface of things. Rather than wrest things from their mere facticity – their ‘being there’ (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 120) – and force them to participate symbolically in the narratives among which they are physically situated, Robbe-Grillet’s descriptions represent objects almost exclusively in terms of their geometry and topography. Note, as an example, the following passage from *The Voyeur* (1955). The prose persistently treats objects and structures with extreme descriptive rigor, and they give the impression of remaining stubbornly unreflective of the protagonist.

The pier . . . extended from both sides of this base line in a cluster of parallels describing, with a precision accentuated even more sharply by the morning light, a series of elongated planes alternately horizontal and vertical . . .

At the end of the jetty the structure grew more elaborate; the pier divided into two parts: on the parapet side, a narrow passageway leading to a beacon light, and on the left landing slip sloping down into the water. It was this latter inclined rectangle, seen obliquely, that attracted notice; slashed diagonally by the shadow of the embankment it skirted, it shone up as one dark triangle and one bright.

(Robbe-Grillet, 1967: 6–7)

Robbe-Grillet’s literature is replete with such descriptions of objects, surfaces, planes, shapes cast by shadows, a world understood in terms of geometry, and the spatial relations between structures. Robbe-Grillet avoids enmeshing human beings and their surrounding material reality in allegory and symbolism. Rather, he aspires to write a literature that captures their ‘being there’. This experiment often succeeds at the expense of diegetic intelligibility. He undoes narrative order by creating works that often read like inventories of the material reality out of which human narratives are born. For instance, in *Jealousy* (1957), he abolishes the hierarchy between the significance of the architecture of a house and the human drama that takes place within it. To appropriate objects and gestures for the purposes of a predetermined human narrative would be to fall into the same pitfall of disquieting ego-logy that he detects in Balzacian realism.

And yet, as Fredric Jameson has argued, things and how they are described are only ostensibly the subjects of Robbe-Grillet’s literature. In truth, the incapacity of these descriptions to master their things preoccupies the texts. Robbe-Grillet’s novels operate according to a principle of perpetual but imperfect repetition or textual recycling that subverts spatiotemporal coherence. In Lynn A. Higgins’ words, the typical structure of the New Novel is that of ‘circularity, return, refusal (or inability) to achieve closure, spiraling . . . gaps, holes, blank spaces, aporias of all kinds, jumps and cuts, proliferating *mises en abyme* and figures of infinite regress’ (Higgins, 1996: 15). Episodes and descriptions emerge and then re-emerge slightly altered, disallowing readers the assurance of knowing what is happening at any given moment. As in *Jealousy* (1957) or *In the Labyrinth* (1959), time, place, event, and object descriptions leak into one another, refusing a clear sense of narrative development or spatiotemporal stability. Rather than effectively delivering reality, textual proliferation ‘mainly shows the breakdown of description and the failure of language to achieve some of the most obvious things it has been supposed to do’ (Jameson, 1991: 135). Most of all, it ‘prevents the reader from piecing together any single coherent narrative’ (Higgins, 1996: 87). Far from striving for a Lecoqian
complicité, Robbe-Grillet’s epistemic erasure works to alienate the artwork from its audience and calls into question the referential efficacy of language.

Lecoq also believed in converting the epistemic relationship between artist and object of representation to one of neutral investigation. In fact, Lecoq is even more committed to maintaining expressive access to an un-anthropomorphized physical world from a position of non-knowing than Robbe-Grillet. Yet, in contrast to Robbe-Grillet’s suspicion of the referential efficacy of representation, Lecoq assumes a capacity for transmission or communication between actor and audience that culminates in his notion of complicité. As his artistic descendants define it, complicité is a ‘form of collusion between celebrants’ (Murray, 2003: 71). It connotes a spirit of collective or communal transgression and playful pleasure that should obtain not only between actors, but also between actors and audience. Complicité is not a theory of representation. It does not guarantee the faithful translation of the real into signs. Neither does it suggest that in the act of representation, the referent does not suffer an irrecoverable loss. Rather, it brackets these risks, reprioritizes the problem, and proposes a model of inter-subjectivity whereby we as actors and audience are mischievously in on something together for the duration of the theatrical moment. Crucially, though, the actor cultivates complicité by approaching theatrical representation through a process of non-knowing.

Lecoq asks his students to approach a given material, object, element, animal, or gesture first by appreciating its ontological properties, without imbuing it with anthropomorphic significance. The object of observation is a piece of plastic wrapping paper. First, the student observes the material. How does it sit naturally? Is it able to lie fully stretched, hugging the floor with all of its surface, or are parts of it already subject to movement by the slight breeze in the room? It is almost flat, transparent, light, easily manipulated. How does it move when we crumple it up? How long does it take to spring back to its initial state, if it ever does? Does it still bear the marks of the impact of its ‘injury’, even if one must look closely to perceive those injuries? Though bearing the traces of its damage, the plastic paper is surely more resilient than aluminum foil. Foil succumbs entirely to the impact of an external force, constitutionally incapable of restoring itself, if unaided, even minimally to its initial form. Through these observations, the actor-mime ‘grasps’, in Lecoq’s words, ‘the various movements’ of an object, its ‘secret rhythms’ (Lecoq, 2006: 69) which, in themselves, do not bear any particular meaning as such. Granted, certain objects might seem predisposed to communicate certain emotions or passions. However, the purpose of the exercise is not to ascribe meaning to the object or to subject it to ego-logy. Rather, the purpose is to discover the object’s expressive potential by meeting it on its terms, by observing it and then embodying its movements in a state of neutrality. To embody or identify with the object’s rhythms, the student dons the neutral mask. The mask ‘removes the expressive biography’ of the face and, ideally, the body (Keefe & Murray, 2007: 145). It transforms the body from a person with a history and context to the status of a ‘generic neutral being’ (Lecoq, 1997: 49; my translation). The masked actor tries to imitate the paper, to identify herself with it. She attempts to ‘become’ the plastic paper recovering from its manipulation (Lecoq, 1997: 53; my translation).

At this stage, the actor-mime conserves the ‘there-ness’ of the object. The actor works his or her best to remain solely within the boundaries of the paper’s movement, not yet seeking dramatic justifications that those movements might supply. Indeed, if the actor is truly able to approach the object from a state of neutrality (a notoriously difficult process), then the spectator would ideally see only the movement of the material in itself. In other words, the paper
is precisely not serving as a ‘vague reflection of the hero’s vague soul’, as Robbe-Grillet might suggest. Rather, the actor’s movements at this stage look largely incomprehensible. Though glimpses of potential meanings might momentarily appear in a given gesture of the pelvis, torso, or head, they just as quickly disappear.

‘Next’, Lecoq instructs,

I discover that those rhythms emotionally belong to me; sensations, sentiments, and ideas appear. I play it again, on a second level, and express the forces in it by giving my movements more precise shape: I choose and transpose my physical impressions. I create another [paper] . . . played with this ‘extra’ that belongs to me and which defines my style.

(Lecoq, 2006: 69)

The original paper disappears into the third step – transformation – through which individual style and theatre are born.

Here Robbe-Grillet might claim that Lecoq’s use of objects is imprudently anthropomorphic, an unsound attempt to ‘enclose’ them within a ‘system’ of ‘emotional’ references (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 21). However, such an objection would be misguided, since Lecoq’s approach never embarks into unmitigated anthropomorphism. Once the neutral mask is removed, the object operates as a fixture that allows the actor to avoid psychological immersion in the character he or she plays. It allows the actor to effectively communicate the character’s emotions and movements without experiencing those emotions directly. In the words of Lecoq School graduate Virginie Maillard,

The paper is always in my performance. It supports my play. I don’t play the paper, but its rhythm inspires me to discover the rhythm I wanted to give my character. Sometimes when I play the character for a long time and I lose my point of reference, I come back to this feeling of the paper.

(Maillard, 2015)

The actor never wholly abandons the paper to play purely the dramatic justification that its movements provide. Whatever character the actor plays – be it Macbeth or Harlequin – the object remains a point d’appui which grounds the actor in the empirical reality of the actor’s object of inspiration. It is a hard reality that is never fully subsumed by human nexuses of meaning, metaphor, and narrative. As Maillard suggests, the object ‘permits there to be a boundary between me, the actor, and the psychology of a character’ (2015). In other words, it allows the requisite distance for lightness of performance, for play.

In this, Lecoq’s commitment to maintaining contact with the physical world prior to its incorporation into human systems of meaning is more thoroughgoing than Robbe-Grillet’s. For while it might seem that Robbe-Grillet’s writings call for the radical separation between person and object, such a separation is spurious. ‘[T]he style of the [new] novel’, he writes, ‘does not seek to inform, as does . . . the testimony offered in evidence . . . it constitutes reality. . . . [I]t is invention, invention of the world and of man’ (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 161). Indeed, in his essay ‘New Novel, New Man’, Robbe-Grillet admits, in what seems like a perplexing contradiction, that his literature is not intended to invoke a sense of objective narratorial detachment, but rather to depict the distorted reflections of human consciousness (Robbe-Grillet, 1965: 139–141). Robbe-Grillet suggests that his novels’ descriptions
only give the ostensible impression of objectivity, whereas in truth they are meant to be the projections of a distortive, even tortured subjectivity. The inextricability of objectivity and subjectivity in Robbe-Grillet’s narrative voice speaks to his broader preoccupation with the emotional register of jealousy. Jealousy warps our perceptual and interpretive activities, turns the meaningless into the sinisterly meaningful, and is perhaps what most lends Robbe-Grillet’s novels their air of solipsistic alienation. To be sure, Robbe-Grillet’s investigations into human consciousness remain vertiginously inscrutable, and do not create the conditions for a common frame of aesthetic reference such as Lecoq’s objects, materials, and animals. Therefore, in his attempt to unknow the object world, Robbe-Grillet paradoxically re-entrenches himself in a twisted ego-logical practice. He evidently believes this practice to develop, in his late modernist period, into acts of self-alienating projection stirred from the depths of a labyrinthine, private consciousness.

Hence, Robbe-Grillet’s work ultimately performs a creative, if not solipsistic, re-enchantment of the object world. Lecoq’s avoidance of such solipsism has a formally urgent dimension. He is a practitioner of the theatre, a medium that he believes should depend on the visibility and legibility of action. This is the purpose of his mask work, to teach the student to communicate with his or her body and not his or her face, which is too small a surface. His aversion to psychological identification in the style of the Stanislavski Method stems from his broader belief in privileging the ‘external’ over ‘the internal world’ (Lecoq, 1997: 30) as a means of theatrical representation. He encourages a sustained engagement with the object throughout performance because this method of creating theatre is public, external to the privacy of self, and hence conducive to communicating emotion, as well as maintaining connection with one’s fellow actors and audience. He writes, ‘To believe or to identify is insufficient, one must play’ (Lecoq, 1997: 30.) In other words, regardless of one’s internal, psychological state, on the stage one is asked to make emotion and action decipherable. We do not go to the theatre to watch an actor feel an emotion; we go to see it played, put into action. The ‘boundary’, in Maillard’s words, between the actor and the character he or she plays facilitates the making-legible of the emotions the actor wishes to communicate, for it extracts the actor from the privacy of his or her psychology. It encourages the actor to playfully imitate phenomena outside of him/herself. In turn, it encourages the actor to connect with his or her audience.

Lecoq would not necessarily contest Robbe-Grillet’s propositions, though he might deem them too ‘intellectual’. However, the medium of theatre – as he understands it – calls for communicable action. Far from getting mired in poststructuralist suspicion about the referential capacity of language and the estrangement that potentially attends such a position, Lecoq promotes complicité. When the actor-mime seeks the rhythm of the paper to play a character, the actor avoids retreating into the solitude of his or her own psychology. Instead, the actor gives his or her play levity by playing with imitating the paper, and the actor is, in turn, more generous toward his or her audience. In other words, when the actor seeks psychological identification, he or she runs the risk of foreclosing the opportunity to establish complicité with his or her audience, because the actor is too concerned with the privacy of his or her own, singular experience. Hence, Lecoq’s movement away from the privacy of psychological identification toward a neutral engagement with the physical world ultimately binds performer and audience. Conversely, a similar process of unknowing led Robbe-Grillet to obstruct communication. Lecoq, who began his theatrical career amidst the mischievous and boisterous energy of the Commedia dell’arte, chooses, rather, to suspend suspicion in favor of collusion. To suspect might be right; but on stage, ‘one must play’.
Note

1 To be clear, by using the term ‘inner’, I do not mean to attribute a Cartesian dualism to Lecoq’s poetics. As Simon Murray (2003) has argued, his pedagogy refuses such a paradigm of human experience. Rather, by ‘inner’, I mean the psychological interiority inherent to the notion of ‘psychological identification’, which Lecoq vehemently rejected as a productive means of dramatic inspiration.

References

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