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Through A Glass Darkly: Gesture in Actor Training

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Abstract

Cognitive science has offered rich understandings as to the meaning and role of gesture in communication. Whilst the neurosciences and behavioural and cognitive sciences forge ahead with new insights into human interactions, the theorisation of acting in order to take account of recent research in these fields is slow on the uptake.

This paper seeks to integrate research from both cognitive science and phenomenology to explore the ways in which gesture transforms action. The paper aims to elucidate modes within actor-training that enhance subtle and in-depth performed communication.

The term body-language (Lamb & Watson 1979; Pease 1987) has often been used within acting processes as if gesture can be considered as a code. However, the day to day unconscious, spontaneous and sometimes subtle movements of fingers, hands, feet, muscles in the face and arms that accompany speech have been revealed by cognitive psychologists (McNeill 2000, 2005; Kendon 2004, Goldin-Meadow 2003) as an active ingredient in the formation of speaking and thinking. McNeill (2005, p. 3) emphasises that gestures act in real-time 'propelling and shaping speech and thought'. They act as a 'dialectic between imagery and language' (2005, p. 16).

Phenomenology embraces the concept of a kinaesthetic landscape that exists prior to human intention being translated into action (Smith 2006; Lingis 2004; Irigaray 1986). Whilst physical forms of actor training pay close attention to kinaesthetic imagery, the complexities and contradictions of language-enhanced performed action require actors to fully engage with their own gestural subtleties.

In *Lie To Me* (2009), the American television series, Dr Cal Lightman, played By Tim Roth, reads the micro expressions of those under investigation by his clients in order to ascertain innocence or guilt. Through reading body language and facial expressions Dr Lightman and his team of 'deception experts' have managed to provide the Fox network with a highly popular production. Since 2009 *Lie To Me* has aired here in Australia, extending to three series. Lightman's remarkable perceptions have pushed the theories of body language and Facial Action Coding into the public arena. Dr Cal Lightman's character and work is loosely based on Dr Paul Ekman's research (1973; 1985; 2003; 2008). Ekman retired as Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) in 2004 after working there for 32 years. He has publishing extensive research on the biological origins of facial expressions associated with a set of emotions, which he codified into his now famous Facial Action Coding System. For those interested in television trivia both Ekman, in his book *Telling Lies* (1985), and Lightman, in the television series, attribute their initial concern with facial expressions and veracity to the guilt they experienced after their mother's suicide, when she convinced orderlies at her psychiatric institution that she was stable enough to be allowed on a weekend pass.

This paper seeks to integrate research from both cognitive science as well as phenomenology to explore the ways in which gesture and language interact in intentional action. My aim in this

research is directed towards actor training and the use of gesture in naturalism. By sharing research from cognitive behaviourists and neuroscientists the role of gestures in the training of actors can be examined more closely and it may be possible to elucidate modes within actor-training that enhance subtle and in-depth performed communication.

In my doctoral research which concentrates on actor training (Hayes 2010), I refer to gesture using a phenomenological framework. I examine actors'-in-training perceptions of being observed bodies. In the specific training that I both teach and research (The Malmgren Acting Technique), actors become highly conscious of their body's movements in space. Part of this consciousness pertains to non-verbal communication between bodies. Bodily stances, angles of parts of the body in relation to the body's axis, movement of arms, legs, feet, fingers, the head, hands, fleeting facial movements, all are able to convey what I term as pre-linguistic reflective communication (Hayes 2010, p. 248). I use the term pre-linguistic because these performed communications operate outside of symbolically structured dimensions solely defined by language. Malmgren's acting technique, basing itself on many of Rudolf Laban's terminologies for specific human movements (Hayes 2010, p. 51; Laban 1971, pp. 86-87), terms these kinds of movements 'incomplete actions' indicating they are not functional actions. The developmental psychologist Spencer D Kelly (Kelly et al 1999, p. 588) states that these unconscious moves 'co-determine the meaning of any utterance', where the person making the uttering may be partially unaware of the totality of the meaning conveyed. I use the term 'reflective' to situate these non-functional communications within Lacan's (1999, p. 216) concept of mimesis, where an ego or identity is established through differentiation between itself and otherness through a mirroring process. Wilshire (1999, p. 167) suggests that in terms of performance, mimesis operates as an unconscious means taking on the 'expressivity of others in [the] a group'. Gestures ('gestes') for Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) are the means through which any animate body explores her world and enacts intentions. For Merleau-Ponty they are also the accumulation or acquisition of habits or skills. Any body's movements in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment are the intermediary position between culture and a given biological world (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 98; Casey 1998, p. 213), since every action is performed within an intersubjective space. The movements that I have termed pre-linguistic reflective communication emanate from what Merleau-Ponty terms the 'autonomous' or 'prepersonal' body (2002, p. 97) that 'cleaves to' the world even before the body/subject has assumed any perception of it. A wonderful and famous example of this is outlined by Iris Marion Young in her seminal article 'Throwing Like A Girl'. It was 1977, when she first presented her examination of young women's motility and spatiality of throwing and in which, using Merleau-

Ponty's theories, she clarifies how the intentionality and motility of young women's throwing abilities are unconsciously restricted through the girls' bodily intertwinement with a male-dominated environment. The results are the socially constructed habits of visible body compartments.

Theatre since its emergence has understandably been concerned with gesture as a meaning-making system. From the formal gestures of masked characters in Greek drama to the later emergence of specifically designated moves for each of the masked characters in the Commedia dell' Arte, gestures have enabled the development of character (Walton 1984; Daniel 1965). Likewise in Asian theatre, for instance in the form that I am most familiar with – the Vietnamese classical theatrical form of *Tuong*, gesture is specific and handed down through tradition to denote character, and expressive states.

It was François Delsarte who created the systematised set of gestures, used by actors and dancers, which influenced Rudolf Laban's movement theories (The Delsarte Project 2011). Delsarte, who lived from 1811 until 1871, wrote nothing of his work and it was not until 1885 when Genevieve Stebbins wrote, *The Delsarte System of Expression* that Delsarte's theories were fully articulated. Delsarte formulated nine principles of gestures, stressing connections between experience or mental attitudes and their physical manifestations in gesture. Nancy Lee Chalfer Ruyter (1996, p. 64) writing in *Dance Research: Journal of the Society for Dance Research* notes about Delsarte that,

Of the three agents of expression that he designated as primary – *voice, gesture* and *speech* – he considered *gesture* to be 'the direct agent of the heart... the fit manifestation of feeling... the revealer of thought and the commentator upon speech.'

I offer these insights to indicate that systematising gestures within performance styles to indicate meanings about character motivation, affective predispositions and thought processes is a reoccurring theme. At times this process has captured the public imagination, for instance in the late 1970s Warren Lamb wrote *Body Code: The Meaning in Movement* which was a popular book and instigated a system called MPA (Movement Pattern Analysis) for assessing peoples' motivations. Perhaps more popularly Alan Pease in 1987 wrote the best seller, *Body Language: How to Read Other's Thoughts by their Gestures*. Dear Dr Lightman from *Lie To Me* and his insightful skills have been preceded by many others.

Turning to science throws a more discriminating light on the subject of gesture. Susan Goldin-Meadow (1999), one of a number of developmental cognitive psychologists researching the role of gesture in communication and its relation to language, divides gestures into two types: the gestures that substitute for speech and clearly serve a communicative function and the gestures that I have referred to in the earlier part of this paper, those performed unknowingly. The former gestures Goldin-Meadow (1999, p. 419-420) reveals as taking language-like forms; they are codified and structured. As in OK (Janys holds up sign to audience) or Thumbs Up (again a sign). Change the fingers and the communication is not the same. More complex systems of language type gestures such as various sign languages fit into this category.

The spontaneous gestures that accompany language have been shown to have meaning for both the listener (Kendon 1994) and for the speaker (Goldin-Meadow 1999). All speakers gesture, even blind speakers and even when they are speaking to others who they know to be blind (Goldin-Meadow 1999, p. 427). Psycholinguists (Özyürek and Kelly 2007, p. 181) have shown that gestures are linked to language through timing and meaning to the 'ongoing speech stream'. Gestures operate in relation to language according to Spencer D Kelly (Kelly et al 1999, p. 588), another developmental cognitive psychologist, to 'disambiguate the meaning of speech' and that likewise 'speech disambiguates the meaning of gesture'. Again she writes that 'eyes, hands, tone of voice...actively codetermine the meaning' of anything that we say. David McNeill, the renown American psycholinguist (2005) takes this further claiming that gestures are actually necessary to thinking and speaking; 'Gestures fuel thought and speech' (Duncan, Cassell and Levy 2007, p. 110). There is a dynamic interaction which is performative in its spatial enactment between speech and gesture. As I gesture it becomes clearer to me as to what I am trying to say. I can actually think clearer as Susan Goldin-Meadow (1999, p. 427) asserts by 'shifting the [cognitive] burden from verbal to spatial memory'. Gestures assist me to access new thoughts. They also help me to consider 'for the first time ideas that aren't fully developed' (1999, p. 427). Gesturing has also been shown to have a causal relationship in learning (Cook et al 2008), so that by gesturing we can retain an embodied way of meeting and representing new thoughts.

Whilst gesture in a range of Asian performance techniques is studied with precision, the theorisation of gesture for the contemporary western actor is given less attention. Krause (2002, p. 270) bemoans the fact that whilst Brecht's epic theatre searches for sophisticated expressions of *gestus*, modern 'method' acting 'downplay[s the] complexities and contradictions' of performed action, as if all that is needed is complete empathy with any character for gestures by seeming osmosis to

emerge from the actor. For the student actor these concepts often result in frozen bodies on stage, in bodies with minimal movements, in bodies locked in a painful self-awareness of their lack of 'naturalness'. One simple gestural problem that occurs frequently for actors-in-training is that on stage or screen the thoughts that are uttered are meant to be occurring in that moment. Actors-in-training can misinterpret the need for gesturing as the need for offering signed information, so they point to themselves, or to others or to parts of their bodies or particular directions, when this type of gesturing, that is gestures which substitute for speech, is not what would be happening if the words were the actors' and occurring at that time. It is clear to audiences when actors' gestures are a mismatch with the text that is being spoken but more difficult for the actor-in-training to grasp what is required. Michael Chekhov's 1953 text, *To The Actor: On The Technique of Acting*, promotes the stimulus of the 'psychological gesture' to liberate performative actions for actors. This rehearsal technique aims to expand the imaginary landscape of the characters played by actors, whilst not necessarily being incorporated into any actual performance. In a similar manner, Yat Malmgren (Hayes 2010) uses Rudolf Laban's 'basic actions' (Newlove 1993) to set performed gestures to score the action for actors in any performed scene. Again, these movements may not appear in the performed scene but, importantly, they add an internal spatial, rhythmic and intentional dimension to the actor's embodied expression. As McNeill (2005, p. 4) states

language is inseparable from imagery... The imagery in question is embodied in the gestures that universally and automatically occur with speech... It is profoundly an error to think of gesture as a code or 'body language'... This imagery-language dialectic (materialized in gesture and speech) is an interaction between unlike modes of thinking. The disparity of these modes is the 'fuel' that propels thought and language.

What then can we say to our students? Perhaps we can begin by stating, 'Dr Lightman, there is no code!' However within gesturing lies a meaning-making process that is an embodiment of imagery which has a spatial, temporal and intentional attitude through which the whole subject/body is expressive towards its being-in-the-world. From our twitches, to our blinks, to the angles of our feet in relation to our torso, to our nose-scratching and ear-pulling, all are parts of a dialectical process of communication with our abilities to speak of the things that matter to us. Actors need to be in contact with the imagistic landscape that their characters' are struggling to express. Carrie Noland (2007, p. 8) in her examination of the new media art of Bill Viola calls the undefinable gestural movements that emerge when performers are in action, 'protentive' movements. These movements

are involved in the process of initiating actual functional activity, which is laid down through our history. We can teach our students that they need always to be on the way towards new and meaningful actions that can only come from embracing their own cultural backgrounds; their already established 'I cans' are set in neural pathways but need to be constantly adjusting to new contexts if the vitality of their gestures are to be witnessed. This 'moving towards' is the important thing; images propelling movement will then create a myriad of 'protentive' shapes along the way towards the next set of sedimented spoken words.

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