

Theatrical and film performance as an actor-author-audience triangle

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Themes

- Spontaneous, unconscious mimicry of another person's gestures and bodily attitude, together with mimicry of their speech, is a force in theatrical performance.
- It creates an actor → audience, audience → actor, author → actor gesture triangle.
- Mimicry is a natural social response, sometimes overt but often unnoticed and unwitting, and need not be conspicuous. As Kimbara (2006) showed it is more prominent the more identified the participants, the mimicked and the mimic, and this is something actors also strive to achieve.
- Not just mimicry of speech and hand motion but, on the principle that gestures are integral components of language, of joint contexts or 'fields of meaningful equivalents' and idea units or 'growth points'.
- In this way, mimicry brings out the author's, the actor's and the audience's idea units and contexts of thinking during a performance.

Mimicry as spontaneous process

- Mimicry is automatic and involuntary, and need not be conscious.
 - Tip of the tongue contagion (when one person can't remember familiar word, an interlocutor standing by suddenly also can't as well) shows how pervasive and “always-on” mimicry is (an insight due to Liesbet Quaeghebeur).
- Human bodies offer identical possibilities for embodiment of sense and meaning. This is the foundation of mimicry and its role in unraveling the contexts and idea units of other speakers.
- By replicating another person's gesture and speech, the mimic imports the gesture-speech into one's own thought–language–hand link. If at the same time you ask in what context this gesture could have been a point of differentiation, you also experience its context, its immediate field of meaningful equivalents.

Gesture-Coder Mimicry

- Examples.
- First, the event in the cartoon stimulus (Canary Row, which we have used as a narrative stimulus. Sylvester, having stolen what he believes is Tweety in his covered cage, discovers it is Granny instead.
- Second, two examples of narrator's gestures for this event.
- Third, perform the gesture and speech.
- Fourth, introspect.



Scene being described

Gesture-Coder Mimicry

- Gesture to be mimicked: speaker was saying “he’s like” – not cage but a metaphor conveying alarm. Hands, palm forward, rock back and up, once.
- Both hands quickly rock upward from palm down position.
- Should give you a sense of a metaphor of alarm for the event.



Gesture-Coder Mimicry

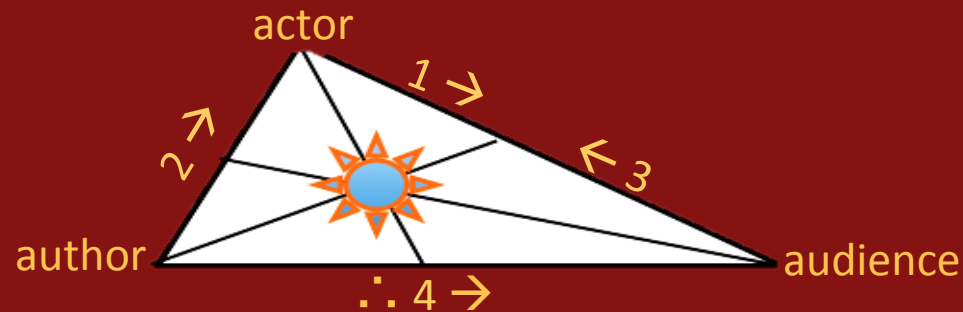
Gesture to be mimicked: speaker was saying “pulls off // the cover of the cage” and ‘presented’ the resulting dénouement. Head tilt and hands position co-expressive with earlier deixis for cage.

- Two hands, palms up and slightly turned toward center, body and hands tilted forward and down. Hands in this position, move forward and down.
- Should give you a sense of a fit denouement to the episode



Triangle in theater and film

Now we can apply these ideas



1. Actor to Audience

2. Author to Actor

3. Audience to Actor

4. Therefore, Author to Audience

1. Mimicry of actor by audience

- The most straightforward – what gesture-coders do.
- By mimicking the gestures and other movements of the actor, the performance, comes to life, and a moment of shared being becomes possible.
- Ofer Ravid, director and acting teacher, describes a phenomenon of “dilation” – the actor as he stands on the stage seeming to the audience to expand in size before their eyes. Dilation is a prime case of audience mimicry and embodiment – small tendencies on the actor’s part, engendered by his own sensations of dilation, are mimicked by the audience, which recreates the sensations in them.

Pear picker → Narrator

Pear picker comes down from his ladder, notices a basket of pears is missing, and displays puzzlement.



Similar to dilation, the narrator mimics the significance – puzzlement – but in her case not the display. She has a gesture of her own (pantomimes counting the baskets).



2. Mimicry of Author by Actor

- Written language does not necessarily mean that gesture is lacking; rather, we can write in such a way that gestures are incorporated into the written text.
- An actor (or any reader) will restore the gestures that are a part of these GPs in the text implicitly.
- Writing is traditionally described as decontextualized, as standing on its own. However this tradition may have missed something. If the origin of language was in fact the origin of *language and gesture*, a unified system, there may be gestures hidden in written prose as a matter of its own history. Writing systems that engage the sounds of speech would encounter the gesture imagery that orchestrates speech actions, the moment the writing goes beyond a mere phoneme notation to actual prose.

Author to Actor 2

- If you read this small bit from a letter by the character Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* aloud with hand movements, you readily spatialize the text gesturally:
 - “...something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature; but I am afraid of alarming you – be assured that we are all well...what I have to say relates to poor Lydia...”
- An actor, reciting these lines, could reactivate the gestures built into them, and in this way recover something like Austen’s original GPs and fields of meaningful oppositions.

Author to Actor 3

- On the other hand, a verbatim transcript of actual spoken speech, its original gestures lost, strikes one as distinctly unrhythmic and nearly unintelligible (if you read such a transcript and form gestures, the gestures seem to be repeated beats, hitting each stress peak, which alone remains of the original gestures).
 - **Haldeman:** Pat does want to. He doesn't know how to, and he doesn't have, he doesn't have any basis for doing it. Given this, he will then have the basis. He'll call Mark Felt in, and the two of them ...and Mark Felt wants to cooperate because...

Author to Actor 4

- Taking *Pride and Prejudice* again, at one point Lizzie, touring Pemberley and believing that no one of the family is at home, suddenly finds herself face to face with Darcy. For both characters it is a moment of surprise and awkwardness. But it is also a moment of transformation in the story. Austen describes Darcy's reaction as an "absolute start".
 - I first tried a gesture that would go with just this line without considering the preceding context of Lizzie's dawning new relation with Darcy. It was a sharp upward jerk of one hand—an "absolute start" gesture, tied to the text (described by an observer as like a seizure).
 - However, considering Austen's likely field of meaningful oppositions, this gesture would not be what she had built into the narrative.

Author to Actor 5

- An altogether different gesture appears when the immediate context is considered (in which the Pemberley Housekeeper, to Lizzie's astonishment, has given an enthusiastic recommendation of Darcy's character – generous, amiable, fair, “the best master”).
- My two hands form an open sphere and rock forward and upward (the reverse direction of the “alarm” gesture). This fits a field of meaningful oppositions in which the Lizzie-Darcy relationship is in focus and is transforming.
- The gesture “presents” this image of the dawning relationship and moves it forward, in a future direction.
- Austen's own GP as she wrote would plausibly have had some such meaning, this opening up (and beyond, in the following narrative, to Darcy's own transformed demeanor).

Author to Actor 6

- The scene was played in the BBC's 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*. An actor fits his performance into this sort of dynamic context.
- How did Colin Firth do it? Unlike his character, the actor also knows the preceding and following context of Darcy's absolute start.
- A start is certainly present (**top panel**) but Firth's expression of surprise was briefly anticipated by a smile as well (**bottom panel**) and also possibly a forward lean (not unlike the motion of my metaphoric gesture) – possibly reflecting the dawn of the new affiliation with Lizzie.
- So perhaps Jane Austen's GPs and momentary cognitive being were present.



3. Mimicry of Audience by Actor

- Movements by musical audiences are typical. Even decorous classical audiences permit discrete foot-tapping, hand-waving, bobbing, back and forth torso movements are acceptable and provide bodily carriers of mimicry.
- Theatrical audiences can do the same and they have speech to guide them.
- The performer can sense these phantom motions of the audience (as argued by Tom Cornford, director and theater scholar).
- Mind-merging with the audience is then possible via mimicry of its phantom gestures and will create shared moments of being all around our triangle – author to actor, actor to audience and back again. Even a large audience can occupy its leg.

Film Acting

- A film actor has the same access to the author as does a stage actor, and the audience, absent but watching the film, has access to the actor and through her the author, but for the actor, an audience is absent during the performance itself, and this means that one must be invented.
- The actor, in contact with each of the nodes of our triangle, feels a need for an audience. Her need is deeper than just wanting to have eyes focused on her. It is a matter of completing the triangle.
- Mala Powers described how Michael Chekhov emphasized the importance for a film actor of *simulating an audience*. Even the camera can become 'audience'. Powers apparently did this regularly.

Film 2

- Ofer Ravid tells me that, during a performance, the director is a professional audience of one.
- Kappelhoff and Müller (2011) analyze William Wyler's 1938 *Jezebel* visually as (among other things) a metaphor of energy-stasis, the realization of which scenes and the actors' movements structure.
- Wyler, the audience of one, would have guided actors to this metaphor with instruction and discussion but also, since he was right there, through his own movements picked up by the actors.

Film 3

- Bette Davis almost flies into the film (a wild horseback ride), yelling at the groom, a volcano of energy.
- At film's end she is transformed, utterly still.
- Horses figure in both scenes, violent in one, funereal in the other – contrasting on a Jakobsonian axis of (equine) equivalents.



Wild horseback entry



Yells at groom



On The funeral cart

Film 4

- The transformation is more than energy-to-stasis. It is a transformation of character, the energy-stasis dimension metaphorizing this.
- Using the gesture-coder's approach, mimicking her bodily attitudes – gestures are stylized and few – we can try to recover something of the actor's modes of differentiation and contexts as she instantiates Jezebel's transformation. Is the energy-stasis metaphor and context recoverable?
- I believe it is. A context of frantic energy at the start becomes serene by the end, and this transition is palpable with mimicry. The field of meaningful equivalents I find most compelling is *WAYS SHE DOMINATES* – first, holding the poor groom to match her ability to control the horse; last, handling her dying lover's funereal ride.
- So Bette Davis completed the triangle as well.

Conclusions 1

- Theater has a dialectic of semiotic opposites like that of gesture and language. I don't mean simply that actors speak and gesture – of course they generally do – but that in theater, too, there is a dual semiosis of imagery and codified form, and they are a dialectic unity.
 - Chekhov wrote of “Atmosphere” – a kind of global-synthetic imagery of the scene. The actor has to combine Atmosphere with codified movements and speech, products of her training, to create the dynamism of performance. It is just as we say that speakers combine gesture with speech to fuel speaking and thinking.
 - Quintilian wrote of three “potencies” that align (more or less) with our triangle.
- In this sense, in heightened and public form, theater is a continuation (not just a user) of language, and this is, I believe, a secret of its appeal.
- Any theater that violates these fundamental modes of human experience could not have survived so long.

Conclusions 2

- And the triangle is a constant. We have seen how there is a triangle and each leg is traversed by mimicry. Many reactions take place and are part of the performance involving all participants, author, actor and audience.
- For most of us – we, the audience – the experience is far from passive. it is more than just watching.
- If actor and director are skilled, it is mind-merging with the actor and ultimately with the author, as we may have done watching Colin Firth recover a growth point and field of meaningful equivalents alive originally in Jane Austen 200 years before.

Curtain

Reference: D. McNeill. (late 2013). "Speech-Gesture Mimicry in Performance: An Actor → Audience, Author → Actor, Audience → Actor Triangle." In *Journal for Cultural Research*, special issue on Cultures of Gesture in Cinema, Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins (eds.)