

The Shadow of the Neutral Mask: A Jungian Examination of Lecoq-based Neutral Mask Praxis

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ABSTRACT

“Psychology” functions as the largest taboo within the renowned pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq; or, in Jungian terms, ‘psychology’ itself becomes the unconscious shadow within Lecoq’s teaching. Carl Jung defines the shadow as: “the thing a person has no wish to be” (Jung, 1966, p. 262). And yet, as with all aspects of the shadow, those elements are indeed a part of the individual (or in this case the pedagogy). This paper will argue that the teaching of Lecoq is indeed highly psychological, drawing comparisons between the theories of Lecoq and Jung, examining a connection between Jung’s theory of a collective unconscious and Lecoq’s understanding of a “universal poetic sense”; exploring their view of the Self, and outlining the movement from general to particular which is the key to both Jung’s understanding of the individuation process as well as Lecoq’s progression through an extended series of masks. Highlighting the work of contemporary teachers like Thomas Prattki, I offer a

(re)evaluation of neutral mask praxis, a journey into the landscape of an unconscious psyche, and an encounter with an archetypal image of Self.

The theories and techniques of Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999), the celebrated French mask and mime teacher, shifted the conventional hierarchies away from a medium dominated by playwrights and directors, towards an actor created theatre. Through his study of mask, and with the help of the mask maker Amleto Sartori, he built upon the ideals of actor training inspired by Jacques Copeau, and yet went further, challenging his students to rebel against the “tyranny of the text” (Chamberlain & Yarrow, 2002, p. 4) and to build their own “new theatre for tomorrow” (Murray, 2002, p. 79). This new theatre required a new actor, an individual who was more than an interpreter of pre-existing texts, but a creator him or her self.

Having repositioned this performer, Lecoq presents a paradox within his pedagogical system, stating: “*Actors usually perform badly in plays whose concerns are too close to their own*” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 19). What he articulates is a strong distrust for ‘psychology’, both adopted artistically as an approach to character, as well as a scepticism about the porous line that separates theatre and therapeutic practices. In his seminal text, *The Moving Body*, Lecoq rejects both: “In my method of teaching I have always given priority to the external world over the inner experience.” I argue that “psychology” functions as the largest taboo within the Lecoq technique; in Jungian terms, ‘psychology’ itself becomes the unconscious shadow within Lecoq’s pedagogical approach. Jung defines the shadow as: “the thing a person has no wish to be” (Jung, 1966, p. 262). The shadow archetype becomes “the repository of all the aspects of a person that are unacceptable or distasteful to them” (Casement, 2006, p. 94). This paper builds on the pedagogy of Lecoq, as well as those that continue to develop within the tradition that bears his name, new teachers who have asked the question: How does one make theatre that speaks directly to those “concerns” that are “too close to their own”?

I argue that the ‘shadow’ of the Lecoq tradition is ‘psychology’ itself. For Jung, the personal shadow is defined as the rejected aspects

of consciousness. As Ann Casement suggests, a confrontation with the shadow is a necessary element of the individuation process. Knowledge of the shadow precedes knowledge of any other element of the unconscious; Casement states that “no one can gain any insight into themselves or acquire self-knowledge without first tackling their *shadow*” (Casement, 2006, p. 98). I argue that one cannot fully understand the Lecoq pedagogy until one has tackled the “shadow” of the training, that of its psychological foundations. To be clear from the start, a critical examination of the psychological aspects of Lecoq’s teaching is only one frame from which to view a highly complex pedagogy. I do not want to limit Lecoq’s work to only one parameter, and yet, by examining how psychology situates itself within Lecoq’s teaching, I aim to enrich and enliven an important (and complex) aspect of that pedagogy.

UNIVERSAL POETIC SENSE AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

While Lecoq takes an overtly negative view of both psychological acting and therapy, his descriptions of his own pedagogical system have much in common with the theories of Jungian depth psychology. Both Lecoq and Jung describe their work directionally, conceiving of their respective studies as a movement downwards. Lecoq adopts the phrase “the depths of poetry”, and he repeatedly writes of an internal search into those depths. A common theme within his writing, and the title of a video documentary about his school, *Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq* (Lecoq, 1999), is the two journeys. One journey is horizontal through theatrical conventions, while the other is a vertical movement downwards into a “universal poetic sense”.

This vertical movement, I would argue, is an exploration into the depth of the unconscious psyche. Lecoq’s journey into a collective “poetry” and his concept of a “universal poetic sense” is in many ways similar to C. G. Jung’s view of a collective unconscious. Central to Lecoq’s teaching, his desire for an international student body and his use of the neutral mask, is a belief in a collective poetry that is universally applicable. One must not conflate the theories of these two men for to do so minimizes important differences, however, Lecoq himself is aware of the potential parallels between his teaching and the

theories of Jung. That awareness is referenced in his glossary definition of the universal poetic sense within *The Moving Body*. He states: "... a concept with Jungian resonances, suggesting that all humans share the sense of an abstract dimension, made up of space, lights, materials, sounds which can be found in all of us" (Lecoq, 2000, p. 168).

An exploration of the universal poetic sense which "can be found in all of us" (Lecoq, 2000, pp. 46-47), a shared and impersonal heritage, becomes the aim of Lecoq's teachings. It has much in common with Jung's view of the collective unconscious. It is his unique understanding of mime, and its association to the "universal poetic sense", that separates Lecoq from his contemporaries. Simon Murray (2003) has described how Lecoq's understanding of mime differs from Étienne Decroux. In Murray's view mime for Lecoq was a means of "producing thought" and not simply a means of translating it (Murray, 2002, p. 28). Murray makes an important point in separating these two master teachers and their approaches to mime. I would like to take the point further and suggest that while Decroux uses mime as a method of artistic expression, Lecoq uses it as a methodology for depth analysis. It was through his "submerged form of mime" (Lecoq, 2000, p. 22), established with the neutral mask, that Lecoq found a means of approaching his universal poetic sense.

THE NEUTRAL MASK: A JOURNEY INTO THE PSYCHE

Much of Lecoq's neutral mask praxis can be seen as the embodiment of a Jungian journey, a voyage into the unknown. I have divided this progression into five stages: 1) A rupture with the persona; 2) Contact with the *mundus imaginalis*; 3) Atonement with the archetypal; 4) Union of the Self and *The Fundamental Journey*; finally, 5) Removal of the mask. I hope to demonstrate how the neutral mask can be viewed as a journey into the depths of an individual's unconscious psyche.

A Rupture with the Persona

For Sears Eldredge (1978), the primary function of the neutral mask is to locate the points of tension, or conflicts, within the body of the performer. The teacher pinpoints the personal characteristics manifested within the body of each performer, taking the form of either

physical imbalance (raised shoulders, rotated hips, or locked knees) and specific rhythms of movements (a heavy walk or a frenetic stillness). The mask is a means of locating the specific idiosyncrasies of the performer, and challenging the actor to temporarily discard those personal habits. In his estimation, the mask “attacks mumble-and-scratch naturalism” (Eldredge, 1978, p. 27).

One can view this as simply another part of Lecoq’s larger attack on “psychological acting”; however, I would argue that the mask becomes a means of provoking the performer into temporarily removing her/his personally constructed “persona” or social mask. Andrew Samuels defines the persona as referring “to the mask or face a person puts on to confront the world. Persona can refer to gender identity, a stage of development (such as adolescence), a social status, a job, or profession” (Samuels, 1986, p. 107).

The neutral mask is a provocation to temporarily remove one’s social mask, it is described as offering no “other”, no role or character, but a version of self without social constructions or, to use Murray’s term, a “Zero Body” (Murray, 2002). The mask becomes a means of challenging students to dissociate with their individual personae, replacing the social mask with a clean start, a *tabula rasa*. The implication underlining neutral mask praxis seems to be that the student is something more than simply their own socially constructed identity, that the removal of the persona leads to the potential understanding of something which is totally “other”, themselves, and shared. This has led to Lecoq’s famous assertion:

There are three masks.
The one we think we are.
The one we really are.
And the one we have in common. (Lecoq, 2000)

Lecoq’s three masks can be seen as offering a movement downward through the three stages of Jung’s model of the psyche: from conscious construction, to the withdrawal of shadow projections, and finally, to the confrontation with unconscious collective aspects within oneself. It is through the removal of the persona that Lecoq begins his study of that “submerged” form of knowledge derived from the body.

Contact with the Space: The Mundus Imaginalis

In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq describes the first improvisation theme with the neutral mask: to wake, “as if for the first time”. While the students may have previously encountered basic activities, it seems important that the first theme, the start of the journey, begins from a position of sleep. There is a subtle allusion to the dreamlike reality that the student is entering. The student is asked to wake and to see the world with a calm curiosity and without preconceptions. Lecoq describes the difficulty the students have in their first encounter with the mask:

Some students have a tendency to first move their hands, then their feet, to discover their own bodies, while all along an extraordinary dimension is being offered to them: *space*. We have to explain that we aren’t dealing with ethnology, that it is unimportant to know how many fingers a human being possesses and that it’s not worth having a dialogue with one’s own body when, much more simply, the world is there to discover. (Lecoq, 2000, p. 39)

The students described by Lecoq seem to be grappling with a monumental shift – a transition in consciousness from the observable reality (the hand in front of them), to the “extraordinary dimension” which Lecoq describes as “space”. But the space to which Lecoq alludes is not the rehearsal studio, the seated class of students, or any constructed set or object; the “world” that he argues is “there to discover” is an “imaginal” world, not unlike what the philosopher and theologian Henry Corbin has described as “mundus imaginalis” (Corbin, 1972, p. 1).

For Lecoq the neutral mask presents a landscape that is not the same as the unmasked reality of everyday life, but a world that is outside of any geographical environment. In his article “Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal”, Corbin argues for the existence of imaginal worlds, using the writings of the Persian mystic Sohrevardi; he describes the “*Na-kojd-Abad*”, or literally, “the land (abâd) of nowhere (Nâ-Kojâ)” (Corbin, 1972, p. 3). Corbin invites his reader to “overcome what one might call Western man’s ‘agnostic reflex’”, and to explore the possibility that there exists an “intermediary

universe” outside our geographical cosmology, in which the imagination receives ontological value (Corbin, 1972, p. 6).

The provocation offered by the neutral mask is to make the invisible visible; it becomes a call to explore the depths of an imaginal terrain and to demonstrate the existence of the imagined land. The mask challenges the students not only to allow themselves to imagine, but playfully to exist within the image: and in so doing, to attest to its existence. In my view, the neutral mask offers a medium through which unconscious material is allowed to surface and is given an ontological status.

Atonement with the Archetypal

Within the Lecoq tradition, it is important to make the distinction between a movement that is “descriptive” and one that is mimetically embodied. When one approaches an image with a separation of subject and object, mime can be seen as a language with both sign and signifier. The student may see a mountain and point to it. The performer may attempt to signify to the audience, making a gesture that the mountain is high; however, for Lecoq, the challenge is to reduce the space between subject and object: the student *is* the mountain. Through the use of the neutral mask, Lecoq attempts to remove the perceived separation between the image and the body of the performer. Indeed, as I have argued, the mountain to which Lecoq is referring resides within the body of the student. Knowledge of that mountain happens through a process of embodied discovery described earlier, and is assisted through a complex interaction with the teacher. If we look at the standard refrain for Lecoq: “You see the mountain. You *are* the mountain. We see the mountain reflected in your body”, we can perhaps appreciate Simon Murray’s emphasis on the body producing thought. With his use of the neutral mask, Lecoq challenges his students to become at one with imaginal environments, to form a reconciliation with nature and, in so doing, with the body: “For in truth nature is our first language. Our bodies remember!” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 45). This atonement with nature remains a studio experience; it is not a nature that is particular to Paris or London; it is an archetypal concept of nature: if we swim in the sea, it is not the Mediterranean or any other locatable body of water, it is the archetypal image of the sea-of-all-seas. The mask becomes a means of exploring an archetypal

landscape inside us: challenging the student to be at one with that imaginal reality.

Lecoq makes reference to the search for the archetypal (although he prefers the term “permanency”). “I have always had a strong belief in permanency, in the ‘Tree of all trees’, the ‘Mask of all masks’, the balance that sums up perfect harmony” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 20). No work to date has examined the connection between Lecoq’s ideals of permanencies and Jung’s archetypes of the collective unconscious. Lecoq’s insistence on an international student body, the search for “universal” human experiences, and his belief in a “universal poetic sense”, all point towards a belief in the archetypal. The neutral mask is adopted in order for the students to encounter archetypal images, to find the collective within the body, thereby offering the students a methodology of mimetic embodiment with a “point of reference” (Lecoq, 2000, p. 38) from which to create.

Union of the Self and the Fundamental Journey

The central archetypal fixed point, evidenced by the neutral mask, is Lecoq’s view of Self. As we have seen, the mask presents no role or character, no “other” (Arrighi, 2010). The mask is intended to be a version of yourself that has not been shaped by culture or history (Felner, 1986; Murray, 2002). This suggests an archetypal Self that is both shared and personal. Lecoq’s assertion that, “There are three masks”, shares a striking resemblance to a Jungian view of the relationship between the ego, the Self, and the collective unconscious, all of which become encompassed in the Jungian model of the Self. The guiding symbol which encompasses all three for Lecoq, is the neutral mask: a vision of balance and wholeness, of an individual in whom exists a world of extraordinary dimensions.

The Self, for Jung, is the archetypal centre and totality of the psyche, consisting of both the conscious and the unconscious. The ego, or consciousness, being born from the Self in early childhood and developed within the first half of life, creates what Edward Edinger has called the Ego-Self Axis. The process of individuation, or the act of “bringing the latent self into consciousness” (Coleman, 2006, p. 160), becomes the teleological aim of analytic psychology.

“The Fundamental Journey”, the central theme of the neutral mask, is a solo improvisation in which the performer sets out on an

epic adventure. Throughout the course of a day, the man-of-all-men travels through many elements of the natural world, as described in detail by Lecoq. One can view each element of the journey as having strong symbolic overtones: the ocean, the forest and the mountain all are ripe for symbolic amplification, the world of dream and myth. Each territory is highly symbolic of the unconscious, and a journey through each landscape suggests a being that is at home in all.

Why is this journey “fundamental” to the Lecoq pedagogy? Unlike conventional notions of drama, there is no conflict in this narrative. The performer is not asked to meet and overcome an antagonist, or wrestle with his own personal fears or history. Indeed, the function of the mask is to reduce any conflict or off-balance. The challenges that are revealed, however, are those personal challenges particular to the student him or herself. Those highly personal off-balances that are specific to the performer become the source of the theatrical experience.

The underlying dynamic seems to be that there is an emerging self-knowledge through the depersonalized encounter with an archetypal landscape. Norman Taylor, who has renamed the neutral mask the “mask of reference”, describes a process of self-discovery aided by the mask as a reference for a future sense of becoming:

As the great man said once: ‘Do like everybody else, and if you are different, Ah! We will see it. In life, a lot of people want to be different, and you have everybody wanting to be different. And they dress differently. And they’re all the same! If you try to be different, you are the same as everybody else. But if you touch where we are united, where we are together, then you will see how different we are. (Taylor, 2011)

Taylor argues that the mask becomes a means of articulating personal difference, not through the attempt at individuality, but through the search for a deep understanding of Self. Each student sets out on a journey alone; he finds his own way through the progression of landscapes. The journey is entirely the same for all; however, the Fundamental Journey represents a “fulcrum point” that begins, not only the study of physical dynamics, but the search for each student’s unique path forward.

Removal of the Mask

The neutral mask holds a symbolic position within the Lecoq pedagogy, representing both the starting point as well as the ultimate goal. It is both an initiation and a teleology: a search for neutrality which involves stripping away the persona, a symbolic manifestation of balance and wholeness that defines an ideal. It is positioned, both practically and theoretically, in the first term of training, and doesn't need to be returned to; the actor has received all he needs from the mask: the call to adventure, the mimetic methodology of studying the dynamics of the unconscious, and the aim of theatrical creation and wholeness. Once the mask is passed, it can be removed, and the student can move forward with the knowledge that the neutral mask is inside him: a transformative image is locked into place, and a journey of mimetic identification can continue. After the neutral mask has been removed it becomes the central symbolic "transformative image", to borrow the term adopted by Murray Stein (2004) to delineate a powerful metaphor that guides the transformation process for the Lecoq pedagogy itself: towards an individual who has been trained with this object, who is open to the dynamics of the world and who creates physically, an actor who is both the centre and totality of the theatre he produces.

CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUATION WITHIN CONTEMPORARY MASK PRAXIS

Lecoq's personal distrust of psychology makes a study of the psychological underpinnings of his methodology problematic; however, the fact that in his writings Lecoq argues that he is sceptical of introspection, does not mean that the pedagogy he adopts isn't itself highly psychological. Thomas Prattki (former pedagogical director of the Lecoq school in Paris and founder of the London International School of Performing Arts), combining his study of Jungian psychology within the Lecoq pedagogy, has advanced the understanding of the neutral mask towards the internal landscape of the actor creator him or herself. The difference between Lecoq and Prattki, in my view, can best be seen in their approaches to the neutral mask. Lecoq conceives of a depersonalized being, "The-Man-of-All-Men", that playfully engages with the external world. "You see the mountain; you are the

mountain". He goes on to say, "we see the mountain reflected in your body". The neutral mask for Prattki is also a depersonalized being; however, that being confronts a terrain that is highly personal to the internal terrain of the actor: the mountain is inside of you, and to some degree, the mountain reflects you. For Prattki, the neutral mask becomes a mediating tool between the internal and external worlds of the actor creator.

Lecoq presents five central masks throughout the course of his two-year training. The masks are organized as a process of formation and then subtraction: from neutral or universal, to larval and then into expressive in the first year, and then from half-mask to clown nose in the second. This transformation mirrors the individuation process, the formation of the ego followed by the process of increasingly revealing the Self along the Ego-Self axis. The neutral mask loses its imbalance and presents a larval mask, a being that does not yet have an understanding of itself. The larval mask transitions into the expressive mask, or full-faced character mask, from innocent naiveté to the fully formed individual who understands his or her role in life. In the second year, the masks gradually are removed: with the Commedia dell'Arte half masks, the full faced expressive masks lose their jaw and are now able to speak. Finally, the clown nose, described as "the smallest mask in the world" (Lecoq, 2006, p. 116), reveals the individual clown of the performer him or her self.

The developmental progression through the masks of Lecoq mirrors Jung's process of individuation. Jung saw the process of individuation as a process through which individuals are formed as distinct entities, different from their personal upbringing, their societal roles or religious affiliations. He states:

In general, it is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological *individual* as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology. Individuation, therefore, is a process of *differentiation*, having for its goal the development of the individual personality. (Jung, 1971, pp. 448-450)

The Lecoq Pedagogy begins with universals and moves towards the particular. The clown nose, the smallest mask, is seen as a fully

differentiated individual. It represents a two-year journey of development. The exploration of each mask individually takes the same form: a voyage and return. The student adopts the task of bringing the mask to life; he is challenged by the restrictions proposed by the foreign object. Unsure of what is being asked of him, the student moves into a territory of the unknown. In the end, the challenges the student faces are not with the exterior object, but within the performer's own self. Once the mask is brought to life, the fusion has occurred and the mask can be removed. The actor creator has not passed through the masks only to leave them behind, he is the one for whom the masks are symbolically alive within: in the words of Jung, "a living third thing".

Much of the recent interest in the contributions of Jacques Lecoq arises from the wide-ranging individual artists his school has produced. A significant number of institutions around the world, continue his study of theatrical creation through movement and mask. As we have seen, contemporary practitioners like Thomas Prattki, but also Amy Russell (founder and Pedagogical Director of Embodied Poetics) and Giovanni Fusetti (Founder and Pedagogical Director of Helikos) are currently exploring the relationship between Lecoq's approach to training and Jungian depth analysis. These practitioners are antagonising Lecoq's view that "actors perform badly in plays that are too close to their own", viewing their own training as more than simply a study of theatrical creation, but as a time of psychological exploration, personal growth, and individuation.

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