

## Gesture and the Story of Culture: A Journey with Richard Blackmur, Eugenio Barba, and Peter Brook

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In his essay, "Language as Gesture" Richard Blackmur attempts to develop the idea of "gesture" in poetry; along the way, he takes a short detour through other arts: architecture, dance, sculpture, painting, acting, and music. This detour is not just a pleasant excursion, however; it is fundamental. As he puts it,

if gesture is of such structural importance in poetry as I claim for it, then the other arts should attest for it an equivalent importance; it is in such matters that there should be a substantial unity in all art . . .<sup>1</sup>

As he goes through each of the art forms, using "example and not argument"<sup>2</sup> to define gesture, he offers a most striking example from the art of acting. He describes an experience of watching a play at the Boston Opera House. The play was Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse* (which Blackmur had not read), and it was produced in German (a language that Blackmur did not understand), and despite these difficulties, or perhaps because of them, Blackmur found a clear example of gesture in the performance of Alessandro Moissi (an actor that Blackmur hadn't heard of). For Blackmur, the words of the play were only tangentially important to the actor's art. They were, as he put it, "transparencies used to time and to bound the acting. What the mere words were [. . .] must have been rubbish."<sup>3</sup> In this single example Blackmur speaks volumes about the limits and the possibilities of his project to shed light on the nature of "gesture." It would seem that gesture is not bound by language—nor is it bound by culture. In fact, the words (text) may serve a regulating function ("to time and bound") in art, but texts are, in a sense, the empty vessels that are filled by gesture.

All of the examples that Blackmur offers solidify the notion that gesture is not bound by language, and Moissi's "good" acting certainly illustrates this as well. But his performance stands out from the other examples, because it is the only one of the "other arts" that Blackmur cites which utilizes language. In non-linguistic art forms (architecture, music, dance, painting, and sculpture) it is perhaps

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easier to ignore the linguistic and cultural barriers that restrain gesture, but the example of acting foregrounds the truly messy questions that Blackmur manages to avoid in the essay: what effect does culture have on gesture? Can gestures be translated from one cultural code to another?

In Blackmur's understanding of acting, the answer to the latter question would appear to be yes. He saw a play written in one country (Russia) and performed in a different country (The United States) by actors in the language of a third country (Germany), and the gesture of a specific actor came through to him clearly. The question that he avoids dealing with head on is *how* this transmission occurred. He says only that the "conventions of voice and movement," employed by Moissi, "must have been universal to western man since I understood them so well."<sup>4</sup>

But let us dig a little deeper into this process. Assuming for a moment that a concept called "gesture" exists and that it contains aspects of communication (transmission of gesture) which are universal (or at any rate understood widely) across cultures (at least western culture), it should be possible to understand this universalizing principle and its most essential elements. I do this, not to be picky, or to pick apart Blackmur's essay in order to dismiss it, but rather to expand it, remembering, with Blackmur, that "we wish to get back to poetry with our sense of gesture fortified rather than obstructed."<sup>5</sup>

Blackmur's sketchy comments about the reception of meaning by a spectator in the theatre are a convenient point to begin expanding the notion of gesture. In the essay, the dynamic of gesture that exists between the actor and the spectator is characterized by the relationship between one spectator, Blackmur himself, and one actor, Moissi. Though he is "speaking for himself" (in the first person), Blackmur seems to have some insight into Moissi's intentions, or at any rate, his inner motivations. "How," he muses, ". . . can the actor understand the play of words unless they seem to rise and set with him as his own meaning?" And he adds, "great acting bodies forth the gestures only of great words: no more."<sup>6</sup> By identifying his own receptive filters—his inability to understand German and his lack of previous knowledge of both the play and the actor—he gives presence to the spectator as a creator (or at least receiver) of gesture, but, one might ask, "how did this meaning reach Blackmur, seated in the Boston Opera House that night?" Blackmur thought it significant to point out the great gulf that these meanings had to traverse—from the mind of a Russian to a German, across a proscenium arch, through (or in spite of) three languages, and into the mind of an American critic. Blackmur allows the majesty of this gulf to yawn impressively, validating the universal nature of gesture.

This is where he stopped, and this is where I feel compelled to begin. At my peril, I choose to enter that metaphorical gulf and try to see how "gesture" bridges it. I will borrow Blackmur's method of analysis by extending his search

for the character of gesture into recent work on intercultural theatre by Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook. They have both taken up the challenge to answer how art can be understood across cultural boundaries. Both have toured extensively in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia looking for the essential quality of theatre (seemingly similar to Blackmur's idea of gesture) that is present for all people, not just "western man." Just as they have travelled around the world looking for gesture in theatre, I hope that my journey through their work will illuminate the concept of gesture.

In *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* Eugenio Barba chronicles a lifetime spent searching for a "pre-expressive moment" of *sats* (I will contend that this is very much the same project as Blackmur's search for gesture) in which the actor has found the most basic level of artistic communication. Like Blackmur, Barba is searching for the quality of art that transcends genre, text, and culture.

Barba identifies a "performance culture"—a culture that is formed among artists, and which does not observe national boundaries. He says, "the theatrical profession is also a country to which we belong, a chosen homeland, without geographical borders."<sup>7</sup> Within this performance culture, despite all of the difficulties imposed by language differences, it is possible to discover what Barba calls "*sats*," which he says occurs,

in the instant that precedes the action, when all the necessary force is ready to be released into space but as though suspended and still under control, the performer perceives his/her energy in the form of *sats*, of dynamic preparation." (Barba's emphasis)<sup>8</sup>

This pre-expressive moment of potential energy is remarkably similar to the description of gesture that Blackmur offers for architecture: "the sense of movement in 'actually' inert mass and empty space is what we call gesture in architecture," and sculpture: "The movement arrested, in the moving stillness, there is a gesture completed at the moment of its greatest significance."<sup>9</sup> Also, just as bad gestures can be made in all of the arts according to Blackmur, *sats* that are poorly executed can become "inorganic, that is, they suppress the performer's life and dull the spectator's senses." Barba also accepts that *sats* is not limited to theatre; it is also present in [at least] opera, sports, and film.<sup>10</sup>

Barba then sets out to find out how *sats* can be identified and taught. He is interested in the very project that I am undertaking, a study in detail of the transmission of meaning from actor to spectator across cultures. Along the way, he encounters a variety of problems similar to those that remain unspoken in Blackmur's work: those of controlling audience response and cultural contexts. As mentioned earlier, Blackmur makes the question of audience response

transparent and seemingly unimportant by making himself the example of every spectator or in some cases referring to an ambiguous “we” or “us.” As a theatre practitioner, however, Barba has no choice but to face the audience [both figuratively and literally]. He acknowledges this quite freely, saying that, “the theatre’s raw material is not the actor, nor the space, nor the text, but the attention, the hearing, the seeing, the mind of the spectator. Theatre is the art of the spectator.”<sup>11</sup>

Given this emphasis on the spectator, Barba designs and focuses his training techniques on giving the actor the skills necessary to transmit meaning to observers. He cites an example of a time when this proposed communication broke down:

We were simply showing what the technical work of an Odin [Barba’s theatre company] performer consisted of, what training was. We made a mistake. The observers immediately turned into spectators. They believed the actress was showing a scene from a performance rather than exercises.<sup>12</sup>

This points to a fissure in Barba’s system, into which Blackmur also risks falling: the completely individual and unpredictable response of the reader/spectator which often occurs even though a skilled actor is supposed to lead a spectator’s imagination in a “precise, chosen, objective direction.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, it seems that all of Barba’s effort is spent in an attempt to control the apparently overwhelming force of random and diverse audience response. He responds to this “problem” by offering:

It is materially impossible to prevent the spectator from attributing meanings and from imagining stories when seeing a performer’s actions even when *it is not intended* that these actions represent anything. (Barba’s emphasis)<sup>14</sup>

Is this the phenomenon that Barba would call “inorganic” *sats* or that Blackmur would call “bad gesture”—when the meanings transmitted are not bound by the gesture that the performer intended? Is this *polysemia*, this multiplicity of unintended meanings the end of the possibility of a gesture which can be transmitted? Barba attempts a rescue by saying,

But let us be careful. It is not the action itself which has *its* own meaning. Meaning is always the fruit of a convention, of a relationship [. . .] The point is whether or not one wishes to

programme which specific meanings must germinate in the spectator's mind. (Barba's emphasis)<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps a "convention" or "relationship" properly manipulated with good *sats* can save us from disappearing into the metaphorical chasm that separated Blackmur from Moissi. Just as Blackmur reached the limit of his analysis by accepting the concept of a "universal" to explain the transmission of gesture, Barba leaves us with the unexamined notion of "convention" which gives rise to a number of other terms which must be explained before one is satisfied that gesture has been transmitted effectively. Here enter "culture" and "context." Barba was able to minimize their impact on the transmission of meaning as long as he could maintain the artificial distinction of a "performance culture" which contained a shared cultural context, but when faced with the spectator, the uninitiated, the other, he is forced to return to "conventions" to explain the strategy for dealing with a multiplicity of unintended meanings.

The British director Peter Brook has faced this quandary, and although he is also searching for a universal nature of theatre, his method involves experimenting with the clash of different cultures rather than acknowledging a "performance culture." In 1968 Brook went to Africa with a multicultural troupe of actors, including performers from all over the European continent and one actor from Japan. His troupe toured from village to village, trying to find a gesture in theatre that was so basic that it could be understood "universally." This journey was successful in the sense that it resulted in a piece of theatre called *The Conference of the Birds*, but along the way, Brook and his actors faced a variety of perplexing cultural exchanges. The experience of a performance in Nigeria, as described by John Heilpern, illustrates the problems of relying on "conventions" and "culture" to contain meanings, and to make them predictable.

After a crowd had gathered, Brook had his actors begin by singing, hoping to strike a universal chord with the Nigerian spectators, but there was, it seems, a "problem" with reception:

[ . . . ] almost without exception, everything in the show, every single event and happening, every improvisation, every sure-fire routine, every joke, every trick, everything, everything failed.<sup>16</sup>

The term failure seems to mean that the show did not have the "intended" positive effect. The crowd appeared to have no reaction. The gestures that the performers made were seemingly lost on the way to the spectators. But were they lost? The example of Katsulas, one of the actors, calls this thesis into question: "Trying all he knew to hold the show together, the only reaction he managed to get

from the crowd was the one that finished him. Without meaning to, this huge and gentle man terrified the children."<sup>17</sup> The children ran from him. There was something that was transmitted. It was not the intended meaning, but clearly *something* crossed the chasm and affected the spectator.

The prospect of misunderstanding, and even meaninglessness now presents itself as a limit in Brook's project. A failure to communicate, and a failure (an impossibility?) of communicating an intention threatens the search for universals. After the performance in Nigeria, Brook makes a tactical and theoretical retreat in an attempt to explain the lack of reaction by the Nigerians. Instead of turning to "universals of western man" (which he cannot very well do in Africa) he seeks refuge, like Barba, in "conventions":

Attempting to create a universal language, the show had been built entirely around a theatre convention of the West [ . . . ] The audience couldn't understand what was happening because it couldn't share the convention [ . . . ] Offer an audience a theatre convention that it doesn't understand and the lie will be given to the convention. It will become what it is, no more than a device: a cliché.<sup>18</sup>

Brook's reaction to this alleged failure was to try harder to strip the Western prejudice inherent in his work, while still hoping to find a universal theatre (a project similar to Barba's). But if a convention, theatrical or otherwise, is no more than a device, a lie, a cliché, then how can it serve as a refuge for the possibility of a universal utterance? If a convention is an artificial creation which has no "substance" of its own then how can the actor rely on it for the transmission of the true meanings of the work? Additionally, what can be said about the only instance in the Brook example when a gesture appeared to reach its audience—the example of the frightened children? Was it a mistake? A misunderstanding? Meaningless?

As I have endeavored to show, Brook, Barba, and Blackmur all rely on a universalizing principle of some sort, a standard by which the transmission of "correct" meanings could be judged. Though all of them accept that there is a possibility of polysemia in these meanings, they seem to conclude the communication is only a success if the actor succeeded in having his/her gesture *understood* on some level. When understanding does not result, then the gesture was a failure (bad gesture, inorganic *sats*, the wrong convention). Ironically, the search for a universalizing principle seems to be the very thing that is hindering them (and me) from answering the question of how the communication of gesture happens, and the question still remains: Without relying on "western man," *sats*, or "convention," how did the gesture from Alessandro Moissi reach Richard Blackmur?

An answer, or rather a deeper question, may lie in that mysterious example of the frightened children. This was dismissed by the Brook troupe as a failure, a failure of Katsulas to communicate his gesture, his presence, to the children. But one cannot dismiss this failure. Perhaps the answer, if there is one, resides in Jacques Derrida's way of describing this seemingly inexplicable transmission of what is, for Brook, non-meaning. In "Signature Event Context" Derrida deconstructs the notion of *communication* in general as a universalizing principle which privileges the transmission of meaning: "As writing, communication, if one insists upon maintaining that word, is not the means of transport of sense, the exchange of intentions and meanings, the discourse and communication of consciousness."<sup>19</sup> Starting from this assumption that communication does not necessarily result in the transmission of what could be called meaning, he goes on to problematize the notion of *polysemia* as a complete compliment to the "intended" meaning. He offers the term *dissemination* as more useful than *polysemia*:

The semantic horizon that habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or punctuated by the intervention of writing, that is of a *dissemination* that cannot be reduced to *polysemia*. Writing is read and "in the last analysis" does not give rise to a hermeneutic deciphering, to the decoding of a meaning or truth. (Derrida's emphasis)<sup>20</sup>

The concept of dissemination, which includes intended meanings and unintended meanings, as well as "failed" communications, which are thought to be meaningless, acknowledges the silent reaction of the Nigerian spectators. It includes the reactions of the frightened children, of the spectators watching Barba's exercises, and of Blackmur watching Moissi. For Derrida, there is no universal principle, no basic level at which understanding is common among people. The performance of an actor will never contain or convey the fully present gesture of the actor. The performance, taken merely as a sign in a chain of signification, will disseminate both "meanings" and "failures" (non-meanings) none of which can be said to be any closer to an "intended" or "originary" meaning.<sup>21</sup>

But is this distinction stifling? Does replacing meaning with dissemination end the project of attempting to find out what Blackmur is identifying as gesture? On the contrary, it opens up a space of possibility at the same point when Brook, Barba, and Blackmur were forced to stop. It allows the critic to examine "gesture" in way that avoids universalizing (as much as this is possible to do) by accepting that, "the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed as such."<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that abstract "universals" should be rejected, only that they lose their claim to "presence" and are acknowledged to be constructions. Katsulas need not be "finished" by

frightening the children because he need not seek to create a fully present gesture in the mind of the children. He is free to experiment without the pressure of finding the “right” reaction.

What form might an examination of gesture take without the absolute measure of a universalizing principle? First, the metaphorical gulf that seemed so vast before, is now, obviously, a construction based on a notion that “there is a gap there”—That is, *something* that “presence” must find a bridge to cross in order to get from the actor to the spectator. Once we accept the thesis that “full presence” is not identifiable or perceivable, the gulf becomes a chain in which those meanings that we attribute to the larger concept “gesture” are seen to be effects that arise out a specific set of unquantifiable circumstances, links on a chain that cannot be followed back to their origins. This does not mean that what has been called “gesture” does not exist. It simply means that it is not a “truth” that can be verified by comparison to universal ideal. Gesture (with a capital “G”) may not exist, but gestures, to the extent that they are contingent upon the alleged moment of their construction and on the multiplicity of signs and their dissemination, can be said to exist as effects of a system of language.

Dissemination may be seen as the philosophical approximation of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. There may not be any way to find the position of an electron in an ever-changing atom, but this does not mean that the atom does not exist. It is simply contingent on an unquantifiable distinction. Heisenberg did not stop the discipline of quantum physics by imposing a principle which removed the possibility of “Truth” in the form of a Grand Unified Theory. In fact, those who followed him had a much more careful methodology for dealing with the individual event. The same holds true for Derrida and the idea of dissemination. Gesture must now be looked at carefully as an effect, contingent upon a uncentered system of signs. How might we talk about this citational and contingent form of gesture?

I return to a phrase of Barba’s for a possible model (in the sense of a constructed paradigm) of gesture. Barba spoke disparagingly of spectators “imagining stories” (see above) while watching a performer. I will try to recuperate this term by suggesting that this “storying,” as I will call it, is a way to discuss gesture. It contains the notion of contingency—an imagined story is not a “natural” assumption; it is clearly constructed (i.e. written). Also, “story” is not dependent upon full presence in its utterance (it contains the possibility—or perhaps the necessity—of fiction). A gesture is, in fact, based upon the interplay of fictive frames of reception. When these fictive frames are seen to be true, natural, or universal, the gesture loses its fictive power: that is, the gesture is stifled because it is seen only in terms of an unverifiable “presence” in opposition to “absence.” Also, “storying” in this sense cannot seem to have a beginning (ontology) or ending (telos), except where these terms are acknowledged to be artificial distinctions.

Nor is there any sense in which “storying” is intelligible or, at any rate, reducible to a set of meanings. It must remain an open text.

To return to the example of Blackmur and Moissi, it is clear that Moissi constructed some sort of story from, among other innumerable factors (none of which were more “present” than any others), the text of the play. Blackmur, sitting in the audience, also constructed a story from this performance (among other innumerable factors), and he called part of that story “gesture.” In another part of the story, he cited that experience, grafting it into another part of this story, one part of which was the essay “Language as Gesture.” The interplay of these different stories—the shifts between fictive frames—could be called gesture.

“Storying” is, like any other model, incomplete, and the term should not become fixed or even particularly “meaningful.” The above example is too simple and obvious to describe the complex relation of signs which could be called gesture, but it is a start, a call to open the book on “gestures” and to keep it open, resisting the necessity of relying on universal principles to create a chasm which those same principles would also prevent us from crossing.

## Notes

1. Richard Blackmur. *Language as Gesture: Essays In Poetry*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1952) 6.
2. 6.
3. 10.
4. 10.
5. 6.
6. 6.
7. Eugenio Barba. *The Paper Canoe: A Guide To Theatre Anthropology*. trans. Richard Fowler. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 46.
8. 55.
9. 7.
10. 56.
11. 39.
12. 111.
13. 113.
14. 104.
15. 105.
16. John Heilpern. *Conference of the Birds: The Story of Peter Brook in Africa*. (London: Methuen, 1989) 201.
17. 201.
18. 205.

19. Jacques Derrida. *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 329.
20. 329.
21. 326.
22. 329.