

Corporeal Mime and Society: From the Viewpoint of Modernity

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Introduction

The aim of my paper is to show how the Corporeal mime represents people living in the city, as well as to suggest the possibilities it could provide for urban cultures.

Before going into the discussion, however, we must make clear the difference between traditional mimes and the Corporeal mime. The Corporeal mime is one of the modern mimes, which was developed by a French mime artist Étienne Decroux (1898-1991) mainly in the 1930's to 1940's. Before the advent of the modern mime, the traditional mimes, or "conventional pantomimes" was limited to imitate people's life, using easy storylines and somewhat comical gestures. They included elements of circus, music hall, and reviews.

Decroux considered these mimes degenerate and tried to raise their position to a more sophisticated art form. Behind his determination lies the fact that he was born as a son of a manual worker, so it is understandable that he found in the modern mime an ideal medium to realize his artistic talent, paying keen attention to bodies in motion.

Hence, he created a completely new mime, discarding unnecessary elements such as a narrative framework based on realism or imitation of bodily expressions. Instead, it became oriented toward expression through highly controlled body movements. Thus, corporeal mime opened the way not only for today's mime art, but also for a wide variety of contemporary performing arts such as hip-hop dance.

The corporeal mime represents human beings who work, think, and meditate under certain physical conditions. Its repertoire depicts a variety of people related generally to urban life. According to Decroux, modern people could be classified into several stereotypes from the viewpoint of their physicality. Following the unique terminology of Decroux, they are called "Man in the Drawing Room," "Man of Sport," and "Man of Reverie."

However, Decroux's uniqueness lies in his way of integrating these categories into a system of body exercise. If we borrow words from Eugenio Barba, a famous stage director and theater anthropologist, Decroux is the only master in the West who established definitely articulated system of physical training comparable to those in the Eastern performing arts.

We will see how Decroux's concept of corporeal mime could shed new light on our understanding of the physicality of modern people, analyzing a couple of performances.

1. Modern man in the city

As mentioned above, Decroux's corporeal mime developed along with his observation of human beings living modern life; what is interesting in this regard is his notion of "Man in the Drawing room."

This somewhat singular term refers to the person who enjoys urban comforts provided by amenities and machines. Kathryn Wylie defines Man in the Drawing room as those who are freed "from the necessity of physical labor." In some pieces of the Corporeal Mime, Decroux represents "Man in the Drawing room."

We find the simplest, but also the most eloquent example of this category of corporeal mime in the short piece titled *Water Glass*. In this etude, all you see is a man who picks up a glass to drink water but there exists no such object. The performer is thus required to feel the entire process of drinking water, being fully conscious of every physical movement accompanying it.

This sketch seems to criticize what we have realized in modernization. We could not be totally free from physical constraints even if modern technologies diminish our pain of labor.

According to Corrine Soum, a disciple of Decroux, Man in the Drawing Room is God because it represents a person who is exempted from earthly trouble.

However, this piece is not a caricature of modern man or woman at ease. We must note the way that he or she is shown in the corporeal mime. During the sketch, the performer holds the basic position of keeping the upper part of the body horizontal while manipulating the lower half at will, as if to show how important it is to sense the effect of gravity exercised on daily life. In fact, behind this short mime, we can see Decroux's philosophy of the physical conditions of modern people.

2. Managing urban constraints

The corporeal mime focalizes on the process in which a particular movement of the body is activated by the support of muscles and bones just as is seen in *Water Glass*; when you drink water, generally you are not obliged to be aware of your postures because the action is executed almost automatically. Decroux insists, on the other hand, that the performer should pay enough attention to consecutive

bodily movements that constitute the act of drinking water, and if this sketch of a drinking man seems humorous, it is because the action is completely decomposed from an analytical viewpoint.

Another important factor to deconstruct a physical action is a sense of time or a rhythm: as *Water Glass* demonstrates purposefully, the movement of this Man in the Drawing Room is punctuated with rhythmic postures. These postures are differentiated from each other since the concerned parts of the body must have precise directions and angles at a given moment, following rigid rules.

Decroux believes that among these constraints, the most important one is the interaction between weight and bodily reaction against it, which Decroux calls "counterweight". As life on earth is designed to bear and utilize gravity, we are not exempted from the effect of weight. Even seemingly natural actions such as standing or using hands are realized through counterweight, which is produced by the cooperation of muscles and bones.

It is at this point that we find the originality of Decroux's conception about the nature of bodily movements. While the conventional dance in the West, the classic ballet for example, has sought to escape from the constraint of weight as we see in various kinds of aerial jumps; the corporeal mime emphasizes the importance of gravity to make physical movements. Interestingly enough, this view is verified by the recent studies of astronauts who, having stayed in outer space for long time, lost the capability of keep standing after their return to Earth.

Simultaneously, his concept of corporeal mime criticizes urbanism, which tends to neglect the physical conditions of people living in the city. In what follows, I will show you recent achievement of corporeal mime, which tries to reconcile urban culture and human bodies.

3. Liberation from the routines of urban life

The video you saw is taken from a work of corporeal mime titled *Table Piece*. It was created by Thomas Leabhart, one of the most famous disciples of Decroux, and interpreted by Luis Torrea who teaches at Hippocampe, a school of corporeal mime in Paris.

Different from *Water Glass*, this sketch makes use of real objects, a table and a chair, though the latter seems not to be involved in the performance. However, the focus of the piece is not just to show an interaction between a human body and a table, but also to suggest various ways of articulating the entire space, which

consists of stone walls, wooden ceiling, spot lights, boarded floor, a chair, a table, and a living body.

Seemingly curious movements of the player should also be understood from this viewpoint. They pursue possible relationships between a human body, and the surrounding space centered on the table.

As is seen, some of these movements have their origins in ordinary life such as balancing on one foot, turning around, putting hands behind the back, or lying down. But, we rarely do them as the performer does. From where comes this difference?

The most distinctive features are found in the performer's use of center of gravity and tempo-rhythm. Following each step of his bodily expression, we can trace how the center of gravity is shifted from one point to another, with clocklike precision. However, these movements become more complicated when they are composed by the contradictory principle of acceleration and deceleration, or momentum, and stillness, which Decroux called the dynamo-rhythm.

And this is the reason we feel some artistic joy in seeing this performance, because it demonstrates how to liberate our body from routine movements, which are unconsciously imposed on us in daily life.

Conclusion: Being human in an urban environment

So far we have seen how modern people in urban life could be depicted in corporeal mime, focusing on the Decroux's notion of Man in the Drawing Room. It is true that the corporeal mime lacks performative aspects like those of contemporary dance and theater. However, it requires a high standard of physical exercise to shake up our body sense, based on the methodological theory developed by Decroux.

Today, it is an urgent problem to make urban life and environment compatible. However, environment not only means outer space of the city, but it concerns our inner environment: the body. If Decroux's work attracts our attention, it is because his corporeal mime explores a possibility of being human in urban environment both as artistic expression and physical exercise.