Theatrical and film performance as an Actor-Author-Audience Triangle

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My talk will argue that a process involved in the production of speech can be found, on an entirely different scale, in theatrical and film performance. It is a kind of "triangle" of gesture mimicry: actor → audience, audience → actor, author → actor. Each leg has its own realization. The actor to audience portion is similar to what gesture coders do – spontaneously mimic the gesture and speech of a subject on video made even decades before. The pear-picker in Chafe's classic Pear Film can be approached the same way. The author to actor leg is more surprising. Carefully written 'scanable' prose contains gesture like imagery. Part of writing is building in gesture, not describing it but placing it as a pattern on which the written text is orchestrated. Actors can recover the author's built-in gestures (Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy, Bette Davis as Jezebel are examples). Finally, the audience to actor leg arises when actors mimic what have been termed 'phantom' gestures and bodily attitudes in the audience. The triangle exists in film acting with the actor conjuring an audience of his or her own to complete it. The audience is active on the triangle too. The audience is more complex and participatory than just watching. Many reactions take place and are part of the performance triangle. Overall, theater has the same dialectic of semiotic opposites as gesture and language. Not that actors only speak and gesture but that theater, too, is a process of imagery and codified form, and they are in a dialectic unity. In this sense, in heightened and public form, theater is a continuation (not just an exploiter) of language.