

**ily cere-
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**notes on gesture
giorgio agamben**

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The Destruction of Experience



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NOTES ON GESTURE

I

By the end of the nineteenth century the gestures of the Western bourgeoisie were irretrievably lost.

In 1886 Gilles de la Tourette, formerly an intern at the Paris Hospital and the Salpêtrière, had his *Etudes cliniques et physiologiques sur la marche* published by Delahaye and Lecrosnier. Never before had one of the most common human gestures been analysed according to strictly scientific methods. Fifty-three years earlier, when the bourgeoisie was still untouched by scruples of conscience, the project of a general pathology of social life heralded by Balzac had produced naught but the fifty – when all was said and done, disappointing – pages of the *Théorie de la démarche*. Nothing discloses the distance – not only a temporal distance – which separates the two approaches as much as the description Gilles de la Tourette gives of a human step. Where Balzac saw only an expression of moral character, here the gaze at work is already prophetic of the cinema:

With the leg as support, the right foot is raised from the ground in a rolling motion from the heel to the tips of the toes, which are the last part to be lifted away: the whole leg is brought forward, and the foot touches down at the heel. At this moment, the left foot, which has completed its roll and now rests only on the tips of the toes, in turn leaves the ground; the left leg is carried forward, moves closely alongside the right leg and goes past it, and the left foot touches the ground at the heel just as the right is finishing its roll forward.¹

Only an eye endowed with a vision of this kind could formulate the footprint method which Gilles de la Tourette sets out so boldly to perfect. A roll of white wallpaper, around seven or eight metres long and fifty centimetres wide, is nailed to the floor and split in half lengthwise with a pencilled line. In the experiment the soles of the subject's feet are then sprinkled with

powdered iron sesquioxide, which gives them a nice rust-red colour. The footprints left by the patient walking along the guiding line enable the gait to be measured with perfect precision according to different parameters (length of stride, distance breadthwise, angle of downward pressure, etc.).

If we study the reproductions of the footprints published by Gilles de la Tourette, we cannot fail to be reminded of the various series of split-second photographs that Eadweard Muybridge made in those very same years at the University of Pennsylvania, using a battery of twenty-four cameras. The 'man moving at a walking pace', the 'man running with a rifle', the 'woman walking and picking up a jug', the 'woman walking and blowing a kiss' are the visible and fortunate twins of those sick and anonymous creatures who have left these traces.

A year before the walking studies, Tourette had published his *Etude sur une affection nerveuse caractérisée par de l'incoordination motrice accompagnée d'écholalie et de coprolalie*, which was to provide the clinical context for what would later become known as Tourette's Syndrome. Here that same isolation of the most everyday movement that had been made possible by the footprint method is applied to a description of a staggering proliferation of tics, involuntary spasms and mannerisms that can be defined only as a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere. The patient is incapable of either beginning or fully enacting the most simple gestures; if he or she manages to initiate a movement, it is interrupted and sent awry by uncontrollable jerks and shudderings whereby the muscles seem to dance (chorea) quite independently of any motor purpose. The equivalent of this disorder in the sphere of walking is described in exemplary manner by Charcot in the famous *Leçons du mardi*:

There he is, setting out with his body leaning forward, and the lower limbs rigid and held tight together balanced on tiptoe; they slide over the floor somehow, progressing by means of a kind of rapid twitching . . . when the subject has thrust himself forward in this way he appears at every moment to be on the verge of falling headlong; at any rate it is virtually impossible for him to stop of his own volition. Usually he needs to hang on to some other body near him. It's as if he's an automaton moved by a spring, and in these stiff forward movements, jerky like convulsions, there is nothing reminiscent of the looseness of walking. . . . In the end, after various attempts, he sets off, and following the mechanism just described, he

slides rather than walks across the floor, with his legs stiff, or at least scarcely bending at all, with abrupt twitching movements somehow taking the place of steps.

What is most extraordinary is that after these disorders had been observed in thousands of cases from 1885 onwards, there is practically no further record of them in the early years of the twentieth century – until the winter's day in 1971 when Oliver Sacks, walking through the streets of New York, saw what he believed were three cases of Tourettism within the space of a few minutes. One of the hypotheses that can be constructed to explain this disappearance is that ataxy, tics and dystonia had, in the course of time, become the norm, and that beyond a certain point everyone had lost control of their gestures, walking and gesticulating frenetically. This, at least, is the impression one has in looking at the films that Marey and Lumière began to make in those very years.

II

In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to re-appropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss.

An era that has lost its gestures is, for that very reason, obsessed with them; for people who are bereft of all that is natural to them, every gesture becomes a fate. And the more the ease of these gestures was lost under the influence of invisible powers, the more life became indecipherable. It is at this stage that the bourgeoisie – which, only a few decades earlier, had still been firmly in possession of its symbols – falls a victim to interiority and entrusts itself to psychology.

Nietzsche is the point where this polar tension in European culture reaches its peak – a tension towards the effacement and loss of the gesture on one hand and, on the other, its transmutation into a destiny. For it is only as a gesture in which potential and action, nature and artifice, contingency and necessity, become indiscernible (in the final analysis, therefore, solely as theatre) that the idea of eternal return makes sense. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is the ballet of a humanity bereft of its gestures. And when the era became aware of this, then (too late!) began the

headlong attempt to regain *in extremis* those lost gestures. The dance of Isadora and Diaghilev, the novels of Proust, the great *Jugendstil* poets from Pascoli to Rilke and ultimately – in the most exemplary way – silent cinema, trace the magic circle in which humanity sought, for the last time, to evoke what was slipping through its fingers for ever.

Contemporary with this, Aby Warburg was initiating those researches which only the short-sightedness of a psychologizing art history could describe as ‘a science of the image’, whereas in reality, at their centre was gesture as a crystal of historical memory, its hardening into a fate, and the strenuous effort of artists and philosophers (verging on madness in Warburg’s case) to free it from this by means of a polarizing dynamic. Because these researches were conducted by means of images, it was believed that the image was also their object. Instead, Warburg transformed the image (which for Jung will furnish the model of the metahistoric sphere of archetypes) into a resolutely historical and dynamic element. In this sense, the *Mnemosyne* atlas, with its two thousand or so photographs, which he left unfinished, is not a fixed repertoire of images, but virtually a moving representation of the gestures of Western humankind from classical Greece up to Fascism (in other words, something closer to De Jorio than to Panovsky). Within each section the individual images are treated more as the frames of a film than as an autonomous reality (at least in the sense intended by Benjamin when he compared the dialectical image with those little picture-books prefiguring the cinema, which, when their pages are turned quickly, give the impression of motion).

III

Gesture rather than image is the cinematic element.

Gilles Deleuze has shown that cinema wipes out the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality. Film images are neither ‘timeless postures’ (like the forms of the classical world) nor ‘static sections’ of movement, but ‘moving sections’, images which are themselves in motion, which Deleuze calls ‘moving-pictures’. We need to extend Deleuze’s analysis and show that it has a general

bearing on the status of the image within modernity. But this means that the mythical fixity of the image has been broken, and we should not really speak of images here, but of gestures. In fact, every image is animated by an antinomial polarity: on the one hand this is the reification and effacement of a gesture (the *imago* either as symbol or as the wax mask of the corpse); on the other it maintains the *dynamis* (as in Muybridge's split-second photographs, or in any photograph of a sporting event). The former corresponds to the memory of whose voluntary recall it takes possession; the latter to the image flashed in the epiphany of involuntary memory. And while the former dwells in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself, towards a whole of which it is a part. Even the *Mona Lisa*, even Velázquez's *Meninas*, can be seen not as timeless static forms but as fragments of a gesture or as frames of a lost film, solely within which would they regain their true meaning. For in every image there is always a kind of *ligatio* at work, a power that paralyses, whose spell needs to be broken; it is as if, from the whole history of art, a mute invocation were raised towards the freeing of the image in the gesture. This much was expressed in those Greek legends about statues breaking the fetters that contain them and beginning to move; but it is also the intention that philosophy entrusts to the idea, which is not at all – as it is commonly interpreted – a static archetype, but rather a constellation in which phenomena are composed in a gesture.

Cinema leads images back into the realm of gesture. According to the splendid definition implicit in Beckett's *Traum und Nacht*, this is the dream of a gesture. Bringing the element of awakening into this dream is the task of the film-maker.

IV

Because it is centrally located in the gesture, not the image, cinema essentially ranks with ethics and politics (and not merely with aesthetics).

What is gesture? An observation by Varro holds an extremely valuable clue. He inscribes gesture in the sphere of action, but distinguishes it clearly from acting [*agere*] and doing [*facere*]:

A person can make [*facere*] something and not enact [*agere*] it, as a

poet makes a play, but does not act it (*agere* in the sense of playing a part); on the other hand the actor acts the play, but does not make it. So the play is made [*fit*] by the poet, but not acted [*agitur*] by him; it is acted by the actor, but not made by him. Whereas the *imperator* (the magistrate in whom supreme power is invested) of whom the expression *res gerere* is used (to carry something out, in the sense of taking it upon oneself, assuming total responsibility for it), neither makes nor acts, but takes charge, in other words carries the burden of it [*sustinet*].²

What characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting. In other words, gesture opens the sphere of *ethos* as the most fitting sphere of the human. But in what way is an action undertaken and supported? In what way does a *res* become *res gesta*, a simple fact become an event? Varro's distinction between *facere* and *agere* derives, in the final analysis, from Aristotle. In a famous passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he contrasts them thus: 'Action [*praxis*] and production [*poiesis*] are generically different. For production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely to do what is right.'

NOTES

1. 'La jambe servant de point d'appui, le pied droit se soulève du sol en subissant un mouvement d'enroulement allant du talon à l'extrémité des orteils qui quittent terre en dernier lieu: la jambe toute entière est portée en avant, passe à côté de la jambe droite dont elle tend à se rapprocher, la dépasse et le pied gauche vient toucher le sol par le talon alors que le droit achève sa révolution.'
2. Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, VI, 77.

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ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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