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Department of German and Dutch

Towards an Ethics of Gesture

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Speakers and Abstracts

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky: 'Paradox of a Gesture, Enlarged by the Distension of Time: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on a Slow Motion Picture of Henri Matisse Painting'

In his lecture series *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan referred on March 11th 1964 to a "delightful example" that Merlau-Ponty gave in his Book *Signes* (1960). Lacan describes it as "strange slow-motion film in which one sees Matisse painting". This is a scene from the documentary entitled A GREAT FRENCH PAINTER, HENRI MATISSE by the director François Campaux, a 16mm black and white film shot in 1946. Merleau-Ponty points, as Lacan puts it, to "the paradox of that gesture which, enlarged by the distension of time, enables us to imagine the most perfect deliberation on each of these strokes". In fact, Merleau-Ponty underscores that this is an illusion, due only to the technique of the slow motion picture. He calls this impression of a rational choice "artificial" and emphasizes that the painting happened in the "human world of perception and gesture" in which there is true choice and creativity. Lacan's reference to Merleau-Ponty seems to be casual and yet it marks the conclusion of an intense confrontation with the aesthetics and ontology of Merleau-Ponty, who had passed away in 1961. While Merleau-Ponty states that in the human world of perception, gestures belong to a singular, existent body, which stands silent behind my words and actions, Lacan interprets the paradox of the gesture of the slow motion picture as revealing the original temporality of the gesture: unlike the act, which hastes ahead, the gesture is according to Lacan the terminal moment. The gesture is related to regression.

In this paper I will present the different ways in which Lacan and Merleau-Ponty refer to the slow motion picture of Matisse painting. I will do this in order to consider the question of how Merleau-Ponty on one hand and Lacan on the other define the gesture in reference to film technology and to the process of subjectification. Both of them refer to the gesture in order to find a new balance in the relationship between subject, rationality and media technology. And it is exactly at the place of the question of the relation between ethics, rationality and (media)technology where the question of an ethics of the gesture appears.

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky is currently Professor of Media Studies and Gender Studies at the Ruhr-University Bochum. She has published extensively on topics in feminist theory, representation and mediality, media theory and philosophy as well as

religion and modernism. Her book *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen. Jüdische Werte, Kritische Philosophie, vergängliche Erfahrung* [Verlag Vorwerk 8: Berlin. 2000] was awarded the Humboldt University prize for best dissertation. English translations of her writings include *Lara Croft: Cyber Heroine* [University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis London, 2005. Translated by Dominic Bonfiglio. Foreword by Sue-Ellen Case]. Her recent book is entitled *Praktiken der Ilusion. Kant, Nietzsche, Cohen, Benjamin bis Donna J. Haraway* and was published 2007 [Verlag Vorwerk 8: Berlin]. She was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley (2007), visiting professor at the Centre d'études du vivant, Université Paris VII - Diderot (2010), Max Kade Professor at Columbia University (2012) and Senor Fellow at the Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie (IKKM) Weimar (2013).

Michael Minden: Ethics, Gesture and the Western Movie

This paper relates the Western Movie to Agamben's implied gestural zone between intention and act. Film is important in the realisation of this zone because it was the first means of representation to capture the body in movement. The Western movie explores the space of ethical indistinction between the acts of individual fighters and the establishment of a rule of law, or putting this another way, between violence and justice. Two classical examples of an archetypal Western plot (*Shane*, 1953 and *Unforgiven*, 1991) that particularly embodies this are cited. In both a gunfighter who has forsworn violence at the start is led by the circumstances of the plot to take it up once more at the conclusion. In these terms all the gestures contained between these beginning- and end-points are analysable as an ethics of gesture because, captured as gestures, they occupy the human space between abstraction and action, suspended between them, and reducible to neither. The ethics of this gestural space is not utopian, but it is nevertheless an example of the ethics of gesture from the history of the twentieth century. *Slow West* (2015), displays a contemporary *forward* ethical inflection or potential of the archetypal generic structure discussed.

Michael Minden is Reader in German Literature and Culture at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Jesus College. He has written on a wide range of topics in German literature, thought and film. His most recent book is *Modern German Literature* (Polity, 2011), since the publication of which he has written on Christa Wolf, Günter Grass, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ingeborg Bachmann and Ruth Klüger, all more or less under the broad heading of 'Literature and Experience'.

Carrie Noland: Ethics, Staged

A crucial insight of dialectical modes of apprehension is that one thing isn't one thing alone; it is also something else. This insight is always weighted with ethical import. "Identity thinking" in Adorno, for instance, alludes to a non-ethical, totalitarian way of approaching the world as consistent and controllable as opposed to internally inconsistent and ever-changing. Benjamin's "dialectical image" points to an ethics of seeing historically and transcendentally at once, drawing attention to time as multi-layered and dynamic. Agamben's "gesture" is yet again a figure for that which allows

us to seize simultaneously two things in one: a meaning (*signo*) and that which "bears" or "supports" that meaning (*gesto*): "mediality" itself, or "communicability" itself. In "Gesture and Dance" he writes: "that which, in expression, remains without expression, that is expression itself, the expressive means in and of itself. ... the dance of dancers is, in the same way, the display of their ability to dance [their virtuosity], their power to dance *as power to dance*" (my translation and italics).

Agamben's turn to dance as demonstrating with exemplarity the ethics of gesture suggests, then, that observing an aestheticized gesture--or observing a gesture aesthetically--encourages us to detach the means from its end (e.g. communication) and see that means as "pure means," or pure "power." This double vision is called in Fred Moten's recent work "the blurr"; for him, not seeing something clearly is also a way of seeing something as itself and not quite itself. Art--or dance, in this case--would be that practice that provides us with more frequent and intensified experiences of that politically salient double vision. But a question arises: Does all dance exercise this ethical function? Are there some styles of dance that do so more than others? Are there some choreographers who seek this ethical dimension of the gestural explicitly?

Without aiming to establish Merce Cunningham as more "ethical" (in the sense intended above) than other choreographers, I explore in my paper the variety of ways in which Cunningham investigates dance as a field in which gesture "exhibits," "exposes," and "renders visible" (Agamben's words) the "means without end," the power to support communication that, according to the philosopher, makes human communities possible. The objective of Cunningham's early work in particular is to lead our perception in the direction of the blurr--to cause the spectator to see both something (a gesture that seems to have a meaning, a semantic force) and something else (a movement that lacks a specific meaning while retaining its semantic potential). Through a study of Cunningham's published and unpublished works (the latter made available only recently) as well as close readings of *Antic Meet* (1958) and *Travelogue* (1977), I identify an inventory of techniques that Cunningham may have developed to augment dance's critical (ethical) power: the juxtaposition of stillness and movement; the engendering of continuity from discontinuity; the recourse to pantomime; the privileging of the awkward. I listen to Cunningham's own reasons for developing these techniques, pausing to consider whether Agamben's theory of gesture resonates in his case. What does it imply about human communities, and about the non-expressive material support that undergirds their expressive and thus community-forming capabilities, if it requires the staging of gesture to bring gesture's ethical nature to the fore?

Carrie Noland is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of three books, *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (Princeton, 1999); *Agency and Embodiment* (Harvard, 2009); and *Voices of Negritude in Modernist Print* (Columbia, 2015). She has co-edited two collections of essays, *Migrations of Gesture* (with dance ethnographer Sally Ann Ness) and *Diasporic Avant-Gardes* (with the Language poet Barrett Watten). Having published numerous essays on avant-garde literature and art, she is currently working on a book project entitled *After the Arbitrary* in which she examines the role of chance in the choreographic practice of Merce Cunningham. The book places Cunningham in the context of other artists interested in random order: Mallarmé, Duchamp, Cage, Joyce, Rauschenberg, and Jackson Mac Low. During the academic year (2014-2015) she was

in residence in Williamstown as the Clark Art Institute/Oakley Humanities Fellow and also received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship to complete her research. She is currently serving for two years as the Director of the University of California Study Abroad Programs in France.

Rebecca Schneider: Extending a Hand: Gesture, Duration and (Non)Human (Non)Representation

What is the duration of gesture? Thinking about call and response, or hail and acknowledgement, Schneider asks: How long can call lie in wait for response? How far can a hail extend? Schneider looks at contemporary art works emphasizing gesture and hands. She also considers negative hand prints at Paleolithic cave sites as well as the rock face itself to address questions of agency and "inter(in)animacy." If hands are vehicles of extension, what is extended in extending a hand? If we can be done with the limits of "representation" what about the slippery skin of mimesis as rock touches (or enters) hand, hand rock? What are the vulnerabilities of geologic time in relationship to human time? Who performs? Who calls? Who responds?

Rebecca Schneider is Professor of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University with a courtesy appointment in the Departments of the History of Art and Architecture and faculty affiliation with Modern Culture and Media. She is the author of *The Explicit Body in Performance*, l997; *Performing Remains*: *Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment,* 2011, and *Theatre and History,* 2014. She is co-editor of *Re:Direction*, an anthology on 20th-century Western directing and editor of two special issue of *TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies,* one on Precarity and Performance and the other on New Materialism and Performance. She is the author of numerous essays on performance and visual culture, including an essay on cloning, "Hello Dolly Well Hello Dolly: The Double and Its Theatre" in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*; "Solo Solo Solo" in *After Criticism;* "It Seems as if I am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor" and "Remembering Feminist Remimesis" in *TDR*. Among other editorial associations, she is co-editor of the book series "Theatre: Theory/Text/Performance" with University of Michigan Press. She lectures widely nationally and internationally.

Alexander Schwan: On the Ethics of Liturgical Gestures in Early Modern Dance

Ted Shawn, as well as other modernist choreographers such as Mary Wigman, Charlotte Bara, or Martha Graham, conceptualized dance with strong theological implications. Shawn, who studied Methodist theology before becoming a dancer and choreographer, even created dance works with explicit references to biblical texts, such as "The 23rd Psalm – Three Dances of David".

In this early choreographic work from 1915, Ted Shawn made proliferate use of liturgical gestures, mainly from the context of blessing and benediction. Strangely enough, these gestures still resonated with Shawn's Methodist background, since he primarily

positioned arms and palms as if virtually receiving or gathering a divine blessing, rather than donating or radiating it. While the latter would have been the case in a Catholic or Lutheran approach, Shawn's gestures by contrast maintained the theonomous character of blessing. He thus veritably embodied the specific ethical aspects of Reform Protestantism, such as sanctification, self-enhancement and social-political commitment.

With a particular focus on Ted Shawn and his appropriation of François Delsarte's metaphysical system of codifying gestures, the paper will investigate the ethical dimension of liturgical gestures in early modern dance. How did they relate individuality and community, prescription and expression, overpowering and self-assertion? And finally, to which political dimension did these gestures appertain in terms of responsibility, power, and guilt?

Alexander Schwan is a post-doc research associate and junior faculty member at the Institute for Theatre Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. His dissertation deals with the philosophy of writing and its impact on postmodern and contemporary choreography. It is entitled *Correlations between Dancing and Writing in the Work of Trisha Brown, Jan Fabre and William Forsythe* and will be published in 2016. In his current book project, Alexander researches theological implications in the works of modernist choreographers such as Ted Shawn, Mary Wigman, and Martha Graham, as well as the reception of German and Austrian expressionist dance (Ausdruckstanz) in Eretz Israel. Prior to his current position, he was trained in directing at the Academy of Music and Performing Arts Frankfurt/Main and studied Protestant theology, Jewish studies and philosophy in Heidelberg, Jerusalem, and Berlin.

Jonas Tinius: Rehearsing Conduct: Notes on Art as Ethical Practice

Until recently, ethics has not been the subject of sustained anthropological inquiry. Building on the late work of Michel Foucault, advocates of the 'ethical turn in anthropology' (Faubion, Laidlaw, Lambek, Das) have coalesced around the notion of the 'ethical subject'. Ethics, it is argued, denotes the capacity to act upon oneself in light of the moral codes that suffuse social life. This paper chooses a central facet of this debate – the 'conduct of self' – and investigates how it sheds new light on artistic practices. Described by Foucault (*The Use of Pleasure*) as the manner in which one forms oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to prescriptive codes or norms, 'conduct of self' is a suitable analytic for investigating art as an ethical practice.

This paper offers an ethnographic perspective based on the long-term study of professional rehearsals in German public theatre, specifically the Theater an der Ruhr in the Ruhr Valley. It analyses rehearsals as gestural spaces and practices of self-conduct, building on what actors refer to as *Haltung* – a term that simultaneously denotes attitude, posture, and conduct. Rehearsals are a collective *locus* and *modus* of action, suffused with the authority of the director and his normative gaze, but ultimately aimed at training actors' capacity to make ethico-aesthetic choices. Their ability to conduct themselves (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) was considered an ethical precondition for 'good' acting and 'reflexive' gestures. Normative authority,

collective acting, and self-conduct were thus co-constructed and reciprocal. Going beyond theatre as a specific ethico-aesthetic field, this paper offers perspectives on how the notion of self-conduct can refine existing and open new pathways for the anthropological study of other rehearsed practices of art, such as dance or music.

Jonas Tinius is completing a PhD in Social Anthropology at King's College, University of Cambridge. His ethnographic research addresses public theatre institutions, artistic self-cultivation, and the contemporary free performing arts scene in Germany. From 2013-2014, he was Fellow of the Theatre Collection, Institute for Media Culture and Theatre at the University of Cologne (Germany). He is co-editor of *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development: The Transformative Potential of Performance* (2015, Palgrave, with Alex Flynn). Since 2013, he has been co-convenor of the Interdisciplinary Performance Network at the *Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities* (CRASSH) in Cambridge and the *Anthropologies of Art* (A/A) research network. For more information, see: www.jonastinius.com