

Gesture and Film

Signalling New Critical Perspectives

Edited by
Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins



Gesture and Film

Gesture has held a crucial role in cinema since its inception. In the absence of spoken words, early cinema frequently exploited the communicative potential of the gestures of actors. As this book demonstrates, gesture has continued to assume immense importance in film to the present day. This innovative book features essays by leading international scholars working in the fields of cinema, cultural and gender studies, examining modern and contemporary films from a variety of theoretical perspectives. This volume also includes contributions from an esteemed actor, and a world-renowned psychologist working in the field of gesture, enabling a pioneering interdisciplinary dialogue around this exciting, emerging field of study. Drawing on philosophy, psychoanalysis and psychology, the chapters think through gesture in film from a range of new angles, pointing out both its literal and abstract manifestations. Gesture is analysed in relation to animal/human relations, trauma and testimony, sexual difference, ethics and communitarian politics, through examples from both narrative and documentary cinema. This book was originally published as a special issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research*.

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The disquiet of the everyday: gesture and Bad Timing

Liz Watkins

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'The exchange of two fantasies and the contact of two epidermises': gestures of touch in Gattaca (1997), The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999) and The Piano (1993)

Naomi Segal

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A mark on the Canvas

Carol Mayo Jenkins

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Liz Watkins is a Lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Leeds, UK. Her research interests include the significance of colour for film theories of subjectivity, perception and sexual difference. She has published on feminism, film/philosophy, the materiality of film and archive in *parallax*, *Paragraph*, *British Journal of Cinema and Television* and *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*. She is co-editor, with Simon Brown and Sarah Street, of *Color and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive* (2013) and *British Colour Cinema: Practices and Theories* (2013).

Introduction: Gesture in film

Nicholas Chare and Liz Watkins

In his classic study, *Gesture*, Adam Kendon describes the visible actions that comprise utterances (Kendon, 2004, pp. 1–2). These visible utterances can occur in conjunction with, or independently to, speech. Kendon’s definition of gesture draws attention to it as a deed and a doing. Gesture is an activity, a product of energy and motion. Human gestures occur as a result of movements of the body, of the face (such as rolling the eyes, winking), the neck (nodding, shaking the head), the hands (the V sign, waving), the shoulders (shrugging), the knees (genuflecting), the torso (bowing, turning your back on someone), the buttocks (mooning, twerking) or combinations thereof. Many gestures form pictures through specific motions: outlining an absent object’s dimensions or mimicking exploits. David McNeill distinguishes between imagistic and non-imagistic gestures. For him, as Kendon summarises, ‘*imagistic* gestures are those in which movements are made that are interpreted as depicting the shape of an object, displaying an action of some kind, or representing some pattern of movement’ (Kendon, 2004, pp. 99–100). These kinds of gestures are moving representations of acts or of artefacts: motion pictures of a kind. Given that gestures are often imagistic, connecting gesture and film, as this collection of essays proposes to do, is an evident, if not unproblematic, move to make.

It is common to examine gestures made by actors in films. Recently, André Habib has movingly explored his enduring memories of the gestural power and influence of the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud’s left hand, particularly in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Masculin Féminin* (Dir. Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1966), but also in other films (Habib, 2015). Gesture forms a key means by which an actor can establish the personality of a character. In films such as *Cruising Bar* (Dir. Robert Ménard, Québec, 1989), in which one actor assumes multiple parts, gesture works alongside make-up and voice to establish character differentiation. The actor Michel Côté plays four different roles in *Cruising Bar*, four aspiring Lotharios whose temperaments are each associated with a specific animal. Côté is Jean-Jacques (the peacock), Gerard (the bull), Patrice (the lion) and Serge (the earthworm). Each possesses distinctive gestural traits: Jean-Jacques is upright, elegant and strutting, Gerard lumbers and ruts, Patrice is touchy feely and extravagant with his movements, while Serge is uptight, gesturally repressed, repeatedly baring his teeth in a nervous smile. *Cruising Bar* amplifies how gesture is used by an actor as a tool to create and detail a given demeanour.

Gesture frequently forms an integral dimension to a film’s *mise en scène*, a bodily contribution to mood. In *12 Angry Men* (Dir. Sidney Lumet, USA, 1957), for example, the gestures of each of the jurors play a major role in establishing their personalities and their shifting positions within the evolving power dynamic in the jury room. The thoughtfulness

an actor and director dedicate to gesture is eloquently attested to by Carol Mayo Jenkins's coda to the book. Jenkins writes insightfully about the different gestural demands roles in theatre and film place upon an actor. She points towards ways in which even the slightest of deliberate, deliberated motions can assume intense significance or, as she calls it, 'define a moment' in film. In a beautiful exploration of the actor's approach to gesture in their craft, Jenkins draws attention to how gestures move beyond words. Visible utterances are frequently carefully choreographed to lend emotional weight to a part. They can imbue a sense of human warmth, poignancy or tragedy to a scene.

Gesture can also be used by an actor as a means by which to signal a lack of humanity. In the television series *Äkta människor* [*Real Humans*] (Dirs. Harald Hamrell and Levan Akin, Sweden, 2012–2013), for example, the alterity of the hubots (humanoid robots) is communicated by way of a certain gestural stiffness and an occasional motional stuttering. The physical movements of the homicidal cyborg played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* (Dir. James Cameron, 1984, USA) prefigure this gestural otherness. In a studied strategy to indicate his character's otherworldliness, Schwarzenegger slowly swivels his head when looking at things. He scans his surroundings, receiving and processing data, in a gesture that signals that he is a product of the Digital Age. The low speed of the gesture and its tightness marks out the cyborg as a simulation of a human rather than the real thing. Constantin Stanislavski commented on how an actor exhibiting 'muscular tautness' would be unable to communicate 'inner emotional experience' (Stanislavski, 1981, p. 97). In *The Terminator*, intractability is exploited to portray a literally heartless character. The force of the gesture resides in its failure to mirror common human motion. Schwarzenegger's staged inhumanity augments the drama.

The dramatic power of gesture is obvious in *Festen* (Dir. Thomas Vinterberg, Denmark, 1998), in which the central character, Christian, a child abuse survivor, repeatedly, nervously rubs his hands together as if endeavouring to remove a stain. Here the actor playing Christian, Ulrich Thomsen, consciously cultivates a physical symptom of trauma, a bodily manifestation of the memory of unspeakable events to communicate psychic distress to the spectator. The gesture, however, is obviously meant to be viewed as an unconscious one. Gestures, as utterances, are not always the product of conscious intent. Some gesticulations emerge unbidden, indexing the agency of the unconscious in bodily communication. Gestures, chattering fingers in Christian's circumstance, betray repressed memories.

The capacity for bodies to suggest psychic trauma is considered in Nicholas Chare's 'Gesture in *Shoah*' which, developing his earlier work regarding how gesture points towards aspects of psychic life beyond signification (Chare, 2012, pp. 131–176), argues that an analysis of the film that is attentive to its gestural economies enriches understanding. The essay draws on the ideas of David Efron, Edith Stein and Charlotte Wolff as a means to consider gesture in *Shoah* at the level of the interviewees and also in relation to cinematography and editing. The study explores the potential, through becoming absorbed in the gestures of another, of sharing another's mental state.

In his essay 'speech-gesture mimicry in performance', David McNeill also examines how gesture links bodies on screen with the bodies of spectators. Building on his earlier ground-breaking work on gesture, McNeill develops his ideas on the relationship of hand gestures and thought processes, addressing their usefulness in a film and theatre context (McNeill, 1992, 2005). With poise, McNeill traces the dynamic role of mimicry of gestures in ideation and communication across writing, acting and reception, suggesting a triangle that links the author, the actor and the audience. On set, in the absence of a live

audience, McNeill suggests that actors imbue the camera with personality, ensuring that the triangle is maintained.

The camera in such instances becomes personified. It becomes a pseudo-human. Gestures, however, are not restricted to humans. The gestures that are employed by Côté in *Cruising Bar*, for instance, are intended to reflect the ‘animal’ qualities of the four characters. In *Cruising Bar*, these gestures reveal Western culture’s anthropocentric tendencies. The vanity of the peacock, for example, is the product of projecting a human quality onto an animal. Animals do, nevertheless, gesture. Michael Argyle has discussed how they use non-verbal communication (Argyle, 1988, pp. 27–48). He describes the role of gestures in a chimpanzee society (pp. 42–43). Barbara Creed examines the visible utterances of chimpanzees in the film *Project Nim* (Dir. James Marsh, USA, 2011) as part of her essay ‘Films, gestures, species’, an inspiring analysis of how the continuity between animal and human gestures has been registered in cinema. Creed views gesture as figuring the animal in the human and the human in the animal. At times gestures are neither human nor animal; they are both animal and human, unfixing longstanding beliefs regarding oppositions between species. Creed’s deconstructive manoeuvres permit the free play of gesture as a signifier. Previous scholarship related to animal gestures, in particular, has suggested that visible utterances possess singular meaning. Creed, however, through drawing attention to the role of reception in sense-making in the animal world, queries such notions.

A crisis at the level of visible utterance’s articulation and interpretation undergirds what is currently one of the most influential texts on gesture in relation to cinema, Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Notes on gesture’ (2000, pp. 49–60).¹ In this idiosyncratic essay, Agamben argues that since the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie have lost their gestures. As part of this thesis, Agamben discusses Gilles de la Tourette’s research suggesting that the shocks suffered by patients with Tourette’s syndrome prevent their being able to gesture: ‘if they are able to start a movement, this is interrupted and broken up by shocks lacking any coordination and by tremors that give the impression that the whole musculature is engaged in a dance (*chorea*) that is completely independent of any ambulatory end’ (p. 51).

If a gesture is interrupted, it remains unfinished, open ended. Agamben states: ‘patients can neither start nor complete the simplest of gestures’ (p. 51). Here Tourette’s comes to stand for a situation that impacts on the bourgeoisie as a whole, as is evident from the films of Étienne-Jules Marey and the Lumière brothers, namely that in modernity, ‘everybody had lost control of their gestures and was walking and gesticulating frantically’ (Agamben, 2000, p. 52). Gesture, as figured by Agamben, signals an inessential communal action of which Western society has lost sight (Chare, 2015, pp. 69–70). Cinema, however, remembers this gesture, a means without ends, pure means. Agamben’s gesture is not a visible utterance, not a specific physical action, but an abstract idea, a trope pointing towards a coming politics that is non-identitarian.

Agamben’s ‘Notes on gesture’ suggest that what is ineluctably cinematic of gesture is not determined by an image, but timeliness in the transience of communication. Gestures constitute a temporality of movement that transforms the photographic into the cinematic, an alteration that demands to be deciphered and yet does not bind the meanings that are to be formed to the content of the image. As Elizabeth Cowie’s insightful reading of *Exotica* (Dir. Atom Egoyan, Canada, 1994) explains, although abstract gestures entice interpretation, they are not germane to meaning. The mediality of such gestures, rather,

instantiates an ethical stance: recognition of the potential of an exchange communicates communicability, the possibility of which is invoked and then thwarted, questioning the positionality of each subject. Cowie's analysis of Egoyan's film finds that gestures are staged as invitations, which signal the spectre of meaning whilst confounding the spectator's attempt to read them as expressive. The ambiguities of sanctioned and improper desire are figured in the actions and expressions of characters through a gestural performance. Cowie argues that the undecided gestures of the film present an ethics of desire.

The political qualities of cinematic gestures, which are considered of Agamben's work by Janet Harbord in her essay on psychology and ethics (2015), are explored in another register by Patricia Pisters through reference to Deleuze in a reading of the video installations in Aernout Mik's exhibition *Communitas*. Pisters explores Robert Bresson's 'Notes on the cinematographer' and Gilles Deleuze's work on the modern political film to formulate a reading that reaches out to the temporality and movement that unfolds as people visiting the exhibition space encounter the positioning and repetition of bodies and movements on screen. Here, the mediality of gestures registers discontent with a language or law that is not sufficient to the instance of need. Pisters's analysis of *Touch, Rise and Fall* focuses on the 'non-place' of airport security that is evoked of its officers' gestures as they cut and search bags. The moments in which the alarms are activated, as visitors move through the exhibition, marks the endless gestures of control which leave the officers mesmerised by the repetition of their task. The mechanical movement of these disciplined bodies is reminiscent of the cinematographic animation of gestures in silent film and yet is encountered in a new medium. Pisters finds that the silence of Mik's video works pervades the collective space of their exhibition. Thus, the gestures that are operative between viewer and screen emphasise the potential of the video image itself as a gesture.

The interrelations of performance and the cinematographic can be traced in the segmentation and animation of bodily movement that are integral to filmic representation. Mobilised by Agamben's note on dance as gesture, Laura Mulvey offers new insight on the interactions of performance and the cinematographic as she examines stillness and repetition in Marilyn Monroe's dance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Dir. Howard Hawks, USA, 1953). Mulvey's use of slow motion as a process of reduplication finds the mediality of gesture between a pause in the fluidity of Monroe's performance, which calls to both the poise of her star image and the stasis of the 24 frames per second that belie the cinematic illusion of movement. In this and her analysis of *Imitation of Life* (Dir. Douglas Sirk, USA, 1959) (2006, pp.149–151), Mulvey is attentive to the nuances of performance which intersect with the motion of the camera and the film medium itself, that is, between the multiple registers of stillness and movement from which cinematic representation is formed (2006, pp. 67–68). Thus, the connections between film technologies, performance and the illusionary worlds that unfold on the cinema screen are explored to consider gesture as medial of these intersecting strands.

Mulvey's approach evokes the readings that were made of the filmic system in the 1970s (Willemsen, 1971) for the potential of abstract gestures to become a form of distancing that distances the viewer from the process of reading (Mulvey, 2006, pp. 149–150) and yet indicates a new direction through an exploration of the intermediality of stills photography, performance and the cinematographic. Gesture, as a form of distancing, was theorised as a disturbance in the film text which solicited the spectator's attention to indicate broader issues of social and political discontent. The refraction of ideologically complicit forms

of representation registers a pervasive disquiet in the social order otherwise expressed by the melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk under the stipulations of the Hollywood studio system (Willemsen, 1971; Mulvey 1989, 1996). The interplay of performance and the cinematographic can become emphatic of certain aspects of the text or signal the failure of that system of representation to signify the specific desires of displaced and effaced subjectivities beyond a demarcation as *other*. This precedent can be tracked back to figure of the mute in the 1940s melodrama as the enactment of a site of social praxis. In the melodrama *The Spiral Staircase* (Dir. Robert Siodmak, USA, 1946), trauma is marked in the deflection of signifying material on to other non-verbal registers such as gesture, music and mise en scène (Doane, 1988, p. 85). The film's heroine, Helen Capel, stands before her reflection in a mirror, her hand clasped over her mouth in a gesture that embodies the silencing of her voice. The effect of Capel's gestures – from the demarcation of her absence from speech, to the desired invisibility of her labour which is an integral aspect of the class system of the house, to the expressive movements through which she implores assistance under the pursuit of a murderer – mark the ethical and moral complexities that are staged in melodrama through emotional and psychological fortitude in relation to other characters.

The excessive gestures of Monroe's dance, like those of the mute in melodrama are operative between movement and image as the cinematographic articulation of her body leads into the close-up of the female star. Mulvey's analysis of Monroe's performance finds a moment of stasis which underpins as a signifier the gesture's relation to meaning, 'sometimes excessive or sometimes ineffable'. Mulvey refers to Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1975) to suggest that such gestures can form a supplement to language or signal imminent meaning. This cinema of delay – the slowing of the film speed and the latent details that it allows the viewer to discern – highlights the ways in which both the gestural quality of Monroe's performance and her use of the cosmetic as mask and masquerade emphasise artifice and embody the cinematic. Between stillness and movement, performance and the cinematic, Mulvey formulates a compelling analysis of the way in which gestures intimate the close-up as tinged with the mortality of a Bazinian death mask and sexual excess. Monroe's performance exhibits the materiality and rhythm of the cinema machine as it dismantles the naturalised erotic image of woman to reveal the artifice of cinema.

Gesture can be discerned of a movement that is taken up by the motility of the camera, a force that can disrupt the formation of meaning as it signals a deviation in an ideologically complicit system of representation. Gesture can underscore or undermine the representation of socially acceptable and gendered bodies. The organisation and disruption of the filmic system in classic Hollywood cinema is entwined with the construction of the image of woman: 'sexuality, its prohibition' (Heath, 1975, p. 107). Watkins' analysis of gesture in *Bad Timing* (Dir. Nicolas Roeg, Great Britain, 1980) examines the ways in which the fragmentary form of the film's narrative draws the spectator into a process of reading for connections between otherwise disparate images and characters. The work of memory can be traced in the desire to make sense of a disassembled narrative form of associative editing echoes a fascination with parapraxis – of a misplaced objects or of miswriting – and their potential to disturb the 'history behind things being kept in place in "order"' (Freud, [1901] 1991, p. 190). Roeg plays with the concept of parapraxis. Watkins focuses on the transience of gesture and the interrelations of body and language, through which the disquiet of miswriting in narrative, as sequences are repeated and stories altered as they are retold, betrays the historical allocation of a disarticulated image of woman as a fate. The film's heroine, Milena, eludes the incoherence of this dissembled image of woman as

her desire, which is silenced in film dialogue, is sublimated into her gaze, a displacement of the senses which can be read as a gesture of discontent.

The potential of cinematic gestures to mediate other non-verbal senses in the visual field is explored by Naomi Segal through a specifically filmic figure of a caress. Read through Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the caress diverges from the haptic and is constituted by optical effects such as the blending of two faces, the reflection or refraction of a detail in the composition of a frame. Such images, although figured in the visual field, signify a kind of 'touch' that is medial. The non-haptic caress differs in using the back of the hand to touch the other, marking a desire to *be* rather than *have*. In *The Piano* (Dir. Jane Campion, Australia, France, 1993), movements such as the brush of Ada's hand across her beloved piano and as she sweeps her daughter's hair from her forehead, find touch to be medial of the mute heroine's voice. Such gestures are evocative of desire in relation to the other as they make visible a caress in the effaced image of surfaces which touch and trace a network of connections between characters and actors who are materially present in a fictive world where the figure of a caress incites the viewer's imagination.

Through an analysis of recent Chinese language martial arts films, Paul Bowman's essay explores how gesture in the fictive world of mainstream narrative cinema is sometimes interpreted as a sign of fidelity to the real. Bowman highlights that in many martial arts films, the gestural choreography is so practiced and seamless that fight sequences exhibit an impossible perfection. He suggests that in this context, the messy brawl between Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) and Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) in a film such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Dir. Sharon Maguire, UK, 2001), with its flawed gestures, its stumbling and miskicks, attains a veracity to which flawless bouts in films such as *Ip Man* (Dir. Wilson Yip, Hong Kong, 2008) and *The Grandmaster* (Dir. Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong and China, 2013) cannot aspire. Studied imperfections at the level of gesture generate a sense of realism. For Bowman, however, debate about which fight in what film is the most realistic is ultimately wrongheaded. He suggests that gesture forms a hinge between reality and representation, articulating and disarticulating these seemingly opposed realms. In his 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', Derrida describes the event of deconstruction as both a structuralist and anti-structuralist gesture and therefore as vitally ambiguous (Derrida, 1985 [1983], p. 2). Bowman draws attention to gesture as undecidable to argue that the separation of the domains of the filmic and lived daily life is a needless metaphysical convention. In reality, the two domains supplement each other and gesture forms a crucial means by which to trace their co-implication.

The brevity and transience of gestures have been recognised as a form of intimation by Elsaesser, signalling the intimacy of the 'borders and edges' where contradicting forces meet (2014, p. 18). Referring to the work of Laura Berlant, Elsaesser notes the sparse gestures that intimate what is between things. It is in this sense that the 'exhibition of mediality' (Agamben, 2000, p. 54) which orientates Griselda Pollock's analysis of cinematic and photographic images of 'Marilyn Monroe' might form its antonym. Pollock's compelling analysis, however, traces the nuances of the actor's performance of 'Marilyn Monroe' across this combination of visual sources as constituting a gesture that disrupts the sexualised iconic image of woman. Pollock moves beyond socio-cultural, semiotic and ideologically inspired readings of Monroe, identifying an excess, an affective dimension to images of the star that inflects our reception of them.

Utilising images from photo shoots and stilled frames from films including *Niagara* (Dir. Henry Hathaway, USA, January 1953), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Dir. Howard Hawks, USA, July 1953) and *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Dir. Jean Negulesco, USA, December 1953), Pollock reads for aspects of the actors' performance of 'Marilyn Monroe' as disruptive of the sexualised image of woman produced by the 1950s Hollywood cinema machine. Pollock combines these images in a *Mnemosyne Bilderatlas*, a wordless picture atlas such as that created by Aby Warburg between 1926 and 1929. In an insightful approach inspired by Warburg and Agamben, Pollock indicates a 'virtual movement of Western humanities' gestures' (Agamben, 2000, p. 54) within the figure of 'Marilyn Monroe'; a movement that operates at the intersections of the cinematic and gestural performance. This gesture, between images and film, typifies the contradictory discourses of female sexuality in 1950s culture and yet disturbs the gravity of the film away from its masculinised Hollywood narrative and the phallogocentric psycho-semiotics of sexuality it embodies and toward instances of affective intensity that are, instead, in the feminine.

Cumulatively, the varied approaches to reading and understanding gesture provided in this book demonstrate the rich potential for film analysis that this topic provides. Gestures frequently inform narrative without being bound to it, thereby indicating valuable ways to move beyond traditional modes of interpretation. Gesture can possess affective qualities that resist, or fall outside, semiotically informed approaches to the study of film. Even at the level of the sign delimiting gesture can often be difficult, as evidenced by *The Remains of the Day* (Dir. James Ivory, UK, 1993). One scene at a bus stop in this film depicts a last goodbye between the housekeeper Mrs. Benn and the butler Mr. Stevens, two people in love yet unable to verbally express or physically act on their feelings.

As Mrs. Benn's bus leaves, their clasped hands are pulled apart. A shared gesture of physical affection rapidly transformed into one of heartfelt loss for the now solitary Stevens. The fingers of his empty hand straighten as the object of his affection moves out of reach. This action would be read as nothing more than a reflex was it not for the subtle, yet certain, retention of this pose. The bare hand becomes gestural *in time* yet fixing the moment at which the hand transforms into an utterance is not easy. This example demonstrates that the beginnings and ends of gestures are always subject to slippage. Jean Epstein recognised this refusal to be limited suggesting that 'on the screen, the essential quality of a gesture is that it does not come to an end' (Epstein, 2012 [1921], p. 273). As the essays that follow each demonstrate, gestures continually provoke new thoughts and point towards fresh directions of enquiry.

Note

1. We are grateful to Nicholas Heron for sharing his thoughts on how Agamben's ideas about messianism relate to 'Notes on gesture'.

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