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Gesture and videographic writing: Manifesting the 'in between'

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Reflecting on her audiovisual study of a dance sequence in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Laura Mulvey notes that 'digitally derived "delayed cinema" [has] a special, privileged relationship to cinematic gesture'.^[1] Building upon her arguments in *Death Twenty-four Times a Second*,^[2] Mulvey discusses how digital editing tools enable the film scholar to fragment a narrative, slow down its mise en scène, and call attention to the 'in between-ness' of movements that otherwise vanish into the narrative flow.

In the years since Mulvey edited and remixed that 30 seconds of choreography from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, audiovisual film studies have proliferated, using freeze frame and slow motion alongside myriad other tools to fragment, foreground, and de-familiarise film moments, re-assembling them into works that contemplate the meanings and affinities of cinematic details. Central to many of these videos – sometimes intended and sometimes not – is gesture, as digital fragmentation and manipulation of the cinematic image render significant even the slightest movements of a performer's body.

The three audiovisual essays presented in this collection employ digital tools to research and explicate the significance of gesture, deliberately engaging with written scholarship. This allusion to scholarship can be explicit within the audiovisual work via on-screen text or voiceover reference, or it might additionally occur in an accompanying written statement. The three videos thus invite the audioviewer to contemplate the gesture of writing itself, to question the relationship between written scholarship and videographic

writing, and to consider how audiovisual communication might affirm, augment, or complicate written scholarship.

Addressing Godard's uniquely audiovisual methods of rendering narration and argument in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Lesley Stern writes, "This was an utterly new way of doing art history, not through the logic of succession and progress, but through repetition and alternation; not through masterworks but through gestural incarnations that linked the past and the present, realms of art and the everyday."^[3] In their own modest way, the videos featured in this dossier echo the poetics of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* with their repetitions and alternations, self-conscious uses of quotation and text, and provocative gestural reverberations. Like *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, they use these experimental methods to evoke the multiple layers of histories and memories that a single gesture can awaken; and like *Histoire(s)*, they reject closure, refusing that reassuring assertion of authority that characterises more traditional documentary and scholarly practice. In this manner, the three videos embrace what Raymond Bellour has referred to as the 'bodily core' of the film text that 'cannot really be quoted nor grasped'. 'It is polysemous', he writes, 'in an excessive way, and its matter, moulded by iconicity and analogy, pushes language into check.'^[4] Though written text might anchor the videos' images and sounds, it never quite contains them, reminding us that the audiovisual essay is itself 'in between' scholarship and filmmaking.

Evelyn Kreutzer's *The Mighty Maestro on Screen* uses montage, superimposition, freeze frame, and side-by-side comparisons to explore connections between the function of the conductor in two cinematic depictions of Beethoven's sixth symphony: *Fantasia* (Armstrong, Algar, et. al., 1940) and *Pastorale* (Niebling, 1967). The video begins with a two-minute epigraphic opening that juxtaposes a voiceover quote from Lippert's *The Sight of Sound* with a voiceover quote from Adorno's 'On the Fetish-Character in Music'. The epigraphs call our attention to the conductor's body, questioning the repercussions of his commanding gestures as compared in the two works that are introduced side-by-side. The video presents additional scholarly citation in the form of on-screen text and relies largely upon side-by-side comparisons of the films. The juxtaposed images resonate with the quotes and invite the audioviewer to participate in the video's argument.

A Zinsel's *Hands, Up* takes as its starting point a simple gestural connection between Ken Jacobs' 1986 *Perfect Film* and recent video footage that addresses police shootings of unarmed black men in the US. Unlike *Perfect Film* (which re-presents, exactly as it was found, discarded television news reportage from

the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X), Zinsel's audiovisual re-working relies upon montage and other manipulations of time and space to invite analogies between the two moments in history. But even as the video's audiovisual manipulations and the citation from Nicholas Chare's scholarly essay suggest the contours of an argument, the video remains attentive to the excesses of the image. Just as Jacobs' film called attention to the indeterminate and unedited 'in between-ness' of the raw news footage from 1965, Zinsel's video retains the spontaneous and affecting qualities of the recent footage, conveying an urgency and an emotionality that exceed the written text.

My own video, *Gesture in A Woman Under the Influence*, models its method very deliberately on that of the essay film, referencing Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* and Farocki's *About Song of Ceylon* in an introductory prologue that lays bare the video's essayistic approach. Fragmented into chapters with sub-headings, the video follows Farocki's stated aim of 'not depicting the whole'. Rather, by 'show[ing] a few particulars in detail, an image of the whole might emerge'. The video's subsequent scholarly quotations appear primarily through voiceover, and multiple layers of image and sound re-contextualise the scholarship, mobilising the work's fixation on the details of Gena Rowlands' gestures to encourage new insight into the film.

A coincidental repetition marks the three videos: each brings into focus a movement of raised arms, illuminating the diverse meanings of these bodily postures across time and place. *The Mighty Maestro on Screen* contemplates the relationship between the commanding arms and hands of an orchestral conductor and those of a totalitarian Führer; *Hands, Up* focuses on the hands-up gesture of surrender that bridges Malcolm X's assassination as described in *A Perfect Film* and current police shootings of unarmed black men in the US; *Gesture in A Woman Under the Influence* questions the fine line between the contorted hands and raised arms of an idealised ballerina and a reviled hysteric. Thus, while each video evokes a specific gestural history, together they suggest an even deeper significance, as their own unintentional echoes confirm the themes of unconscious repetition that each video addresses separately.

Author

Tracy Cox-Stanton is a professor at Savannah College of Art and Design where she coordinates the MA graduate program in cinema studies. She is the founder and editor of the online journal The Cine-Files.

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Notes

- [1] Mulvey 2015, p. 6.
- [2] Mulvey 2006.
- [3] Stern 2012, p. 27.
- [4] Bellour 1985, p. 54.