

## Gesture in 'A Woman Under the Influence', a charting of relations

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- Voiceover Transcript -

## 1

### writing

### parts and wholes

In the essay film, like the video essay, words are not just ideas. They're also sounds and images. When an essay film examines its object, words often fade away completely, supplanted by the complex signifying landscape of *mise en scène*. The video essay, like the essay film, enables an irrational enlargement of its 'object's scattered parts'.<sup>[1]</sup>

I start by adapting Laura Mulvey's experiment in 'delayed cinema', extracting some fragments from their larger continuum, enlarging them, and charting their relations. I too am interested in women's gestures. I'm interested in Gena Rowlands' gestures as Mabel Longhetti in *A Woman Under the Influence*, her performance of the dying swan, the movements of her arms and her hands.

## 2

### gesture

### hauntologies

### the ineffable

If I were interested in auteurism, I'd start by talking about the centrality of gesture in the cinema of John Cassavetes. But I'm interested in the gesture itself, the way it exceeds human agency.

I'm interested in the way Gena Rowlands' movements evoke what Lesley Stern has called 'the ghostliness of gesture'. She writes, 'Gestures are performed individually, but they are not possessed by individuals .... Gestures migrate from one movie to another. They acquire force and significance through repetition and variation. They are never simply signs – of a singular emotion, or identity ... but a charting of relations, imagined as well as real, interdiegetic as well as between films and audiences, stars and fans, characters and actors'.<sup>[2]</sup>

Later, writing about her remix video of Marilyn Monroe's movements, Laura Mulvey refers to cinematic gesture as 'the ghost in the machine', likening the halting in-between-ness of the body's expressions to new forms of spectatorship enabled by digital technologies. She writes, 'At its most literal, gesture is mime-like, a recognizable signal proffering a supplement to the verbal, reducing the abstraction of language to bodily, material expressiveness. On the other hand, gesture hovers on the brink of meaning, suggesting but resisting and remaining closer to the ineffable than the fullness of language'.[3]

### 3

#### *Swan Lake*

#### becoming animal transmission

There is no singular *Swan Lake*. In dance, as in the cinema, meaning is conveyed not in a direct line from auteur to perceiver; rather, it is transmitted through the body of a performer who reshapes and reinterprets the text.[4] While its story hinges on a princess' wish to be *released* from a curse that has turned her into a swan, the mise en scène of the ballet acclaims the rapturous beauty of becoming-animal.

Though it is often incorporated into modern interpretations of the ballet, the performance of 'the Dying Swan' was not part of the original *Swan Lake*. Rather, it was created in 1905 for the famous ballerina Anna Pavlova, who performed the dance over 4,000 times. She achieved mythical status, lauded for her otherworldly ability to express the ineffable with her entire body, somehow treasured for her deviance rather than despised for it.

This complex discourse that we might call *Swan Lake* is announced through the vocabulary of the body. It reverberates through the bodies of performers and through the history of cinema, giving form to the bewildering distinctions our culture makes between the beautiful and the grotesque, between human and animal, between liberation and madness, between the sublime loss of self and the horror of death. Anna Pavlova, on her deathbed, is said to have cried out, 'Prepare my swan costume'.

## 4

**hands****occulted perceptions****the spectacle of pain<sup>[5]</sup>**

This slow, steady tracking shot in *A Woman Under the Influence* interrupts the rhythm of the film. Itself out of place, this shot invites us into *a world* of things out of place, like a bed in a dining room.

Mabel herself is a study in the inappropriate and her hands are a repository of all her improprieties. Their anguished, halting rhythms seem sometimes to be in touch with something just out of reach. Peter Brooks writes, 'Gesture appears as a way to make available certain occulted perceptions and relationships, to render ... a world of significant shadows'.<sup>[6]</sup>

The shadows cast by Mabel's hands are dark and many. The shadows disseminate through the past, conjuring other histories, other women, other bodies fixed in celluloid, oil, and emulsion. Dark and many are the shadows of La Salpêtrière hospital in Paris where Jean-Martin Charcot held his weekly lectures and demonstrations of women in the bodily contortions of a condition he called hysteria. These disheveled women under his influence performed their deviant gestures for the onlooking men and later for the camera, as the chronophotographer Albert Londe was soon enlisted to establish a department of photography for the hospital.

In the study of certain nervous affections, ... photography is the obvious means of preserving the exact image of phenomena that are too short-lived to be analysed in direct observation. According to certain hypotheses, the eye itself cannot perceive movements that are far too rapid ... Thanks to photo-chronographic methods, the eye's impotence can be easily supplemented.

After having studied the whole, the attention should be turned to the various limbs that may be affected in isolation, or which in the case of a general affection demand to be reproduced on a larger scale.<sup>[7]</sup>

Charcot referred to the hospital as a 'living pathological museum'.<sup>[8]</sup> From 1878 when Charcot opened the photography department at the Paris hospital, into the early days of the cinema, women's gestures and hands continued to bear public scrutiny. In Hollywood's silent era, an actress' hands were central to her stock-in-trade. A 1925 article in *Picture Play* magazine tells of a beautiful Hollywood hopeful approaching her first screen test:

Her eyes seemed capable of mirroring the depths of her very soul and her smile was entrancing. Surely, she was a find! But she wasn't. An assistant cameraman voiced the thought of all who saw that screen test: 'Love o' Mike, look at them hands!'[9]

The *Picture Play* story, like the decades of publicity and advertisements that would follow, serves as a cautionary tale for its women readers who were surely bewildered by the rules of this strange cultural game that makes such facile distinctions between the beautiful and the grotesque, the genius and the degenerate.

## 5

### feminine writing

### feminist fits

In her essay about *Klute* titled 'Funny Hands and Feminist Fits', Amelie Hastie describes another casting call in which a passing reference to Bree Daniels' 'funny hands' provides her own entry point into the film, encouraging her compassion for Bree's character and her openness to the text. She wonders if Bree's hands might invite a spectatorship that lies outside the structures of power that marks the film's voyeuristic style. "Though Bree's hands never gesture "come closer", she writes, 'they have that effect on me... Rather than looking at Bree from the perspective of a menacing voyeur, I have become, instead, a conscious observer, a feminist witness'.[10]

Mabel Longhetti's hands have invited me in, encouraging me to imagine a new way of looking, a new way of writing with these women, now under my influence, and I under theirs. I study the parts, hoping for an image of the whole, hoping also to undermine what Cixous described as the discourse of mastery, and instead encourage a rapport between the bodies on the screen and our bodies that observe. I imagine a feminine writing that proceeds in fits and starts, restoring and honoring these 'other[s] that I am and am not',[11] charting their relations, and allowing their becomings.

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## Notes

- [1] Rascaroli 2017, p. 7. In *How the Essay Film Thinks*, Laura Rascaroli likens the essay film's functioning to Adorno's discussion of the essay form: 'Rather than copying its object and offering a closed argument about it ... the essay operates on its object's scattered parts. In this way, the essay shuns suture and works in a regime of radical disjunction'.
- [2] Stern 2014, n.p.
- [3] Mulvey 2015, p. 7.
- [4] Cohen 1982, p. 7. Selma Jeanne Cohen writes about the history of Swan Lake: 'Unlike a painting or a novel, a dance cannot be experienced directly as an intimate encounter between work and perceiver. When the work must be transmitted through an intermediary, through the person of a performer, then its material is constantly rethought, reshaped, reinterpreted'.
- [5] A subtitle from section 4, 'the spectacle of pain', is borrowed also from Didi-Huberman's book *The Invention of Hysteria* that considers the photographic and performative evidence of 'hysteria' at the Salpêtrière. He writes, 'I am attempting, fundamentally, to reopen the question of what the word "spectacle" might have meant in the expression "the spectacle of pain"' (Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 3).
- [6] Brooks 1984, p. 77.
- [7] Londe 1893, quoted in the appendix of Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 286.
- [8] Charcot, quoted in the appendix of Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 281.
- [9] Woodridge 1925, p. 54.
- [10] Hastie 2019, p. 64.
- [11] Cixous 1994, p. 42. Cixous writes, 'Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me ...'