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Cinematic gesture: The ghost in the machine

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My essay considers the relationship between a gesture and the emotion it conveys as a moment of narrative halt that has an analogical relation to the halt enabled by new forms of spectatorship. It explores this halt as the pause of emotion and the pause for thought. I will also examine how the star system produces an intrinsically “gestural” and “emotive” performance style.

Keywords: gesture; Marilyn Monroe; delay; animate/inanimate; cosmetic; living dead

I would like to use the opportunity offered by this essay to return to my visual analysis of a fragment of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Dir. Howard Hawks, USA, 1953). In the song and dance duet, “Two Little Girls from Little Rock”, performed by Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe, Marilyn moves towards the camera with four distinct gestures, finally nearly filling the screen with her trademark close-up. The movement takes thirty seconds, which I then re-edited, stretching it into three minutes, pausing on Marilyn’s gestures and repeating the sequence, twice slowed down and silent, but beginning and ending with normal speed. In *Death Twenty-four Times a Second*, I mention this “re-mix” briefly as an experiment in the kind of delayed cinema that I was discussing in the book. Before I had ever thought of re-editing the sequence, I had watched it many times, fascinated by Marilyn’s ability to hover between movement and stillness and the way that the pauses, slow motion and repetitions of delayed cinema simply, in this case, materialised something that was already there. I realised that my attention had been literally caught as the figure moved into a fleeting moment of stasis; and that I paused the film to catch the high point within this unfolding of a gesture. It seemed that digitally derived “delayed cinema” had a special, privileged relationship to cinematic gesture. In the end, I decided to turn these moments of casual analysis (always partly trying to possess and hold on to the body, partly reflecting on and analysing its cinematic nature) into a re-mix. If the piece has continued to interest me, it is due to the way that Marilyn Monroe’s qualities as film star and performer lead further towards a more abstract consideration of the aesthetics of cinematic gesture as such.

Delayed cinema creates fragments that exist in limbo, extracted from their larger filmic continuum but residually tied to it; similarly, a frozen frame is always part of a series and differs essentially from the temporal self-sufficiency of the still photograph. This “in between-ness” that characterises the fragment or the freeze-frame has a parallel in the

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aesthetics and significance of gesture. In his essay, “Notes on Gesture”, Giorgio Agamben suggests that gesture is characterised by a state of suspension, of being in a time linked neither to beginning nor to completion, neither goal directed nor an end in itself. Gesture exists in between desire and fulfilment in “a sphere of pure and endless mediality” (Agamben, 2000, pp. 58–59). He points out, for instance:

If dance is a gesture, it is so, rather because it is nothing more than the endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporeal movements. *The gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* (Agamben, 2000, pp. 57–58)

In this sense, the act of delaying cinema reduplicates, and makes visible (as such), the exhibition of mediality with which Agamben defines gesture. The two intertwine when cinematic gesture is the subject of the fragment: the body caught in gesture occupies a space and time of its own just as the fragment is detached from narrative linearity or the logic of cause and effect. This aesthetic of “in between-ness” underpins as a signifier the gesture’s relation to meaning, sometimes excessive or sometimes ineffable. At its most literal, gesture is mime-like, a recognisable 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. Peter Brooks draws on both kinds of gesture in his analysis of melodramatic performance and summarises its second form:

Mute gesture is an expressionistic means – precisely the means of the melodrama – to render meanings which are ineffable, but none the less operative in the sphere of human ethical relationships. Gesture could perhaps then be typed as the nature of catachresis, the figure used when there is no “proper” name for something ... Yet of course it is the fullness, the pregnancy of the blank that is significant: meaning-full though unspeakable. (Brooks, 1984, pp. 72–73)

And:

Gesture appears as a way to make available certain occulted perceptions and relationships, to render, with the audacity of an as-if proposition, a world of significant shadows. (Brooks, 1984, p. 77)

Both of these forms of gesture are to be found in the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence: the readable and the mime-like lead into the close-up, in which meaning is excessive, elusive and ultimately ineffable.

The sequence begins with both stars on screen. Marilyn takes up the song and, at first, she seems to address Jane Russell, with the words: “I learned an awful lot in Little Rock”. Her hand gestures to her head with “learned” as she turns, confidentially, to Jane; then her right hand reaches to her left shoulder, raising it and tugging at her dress, as though it were about to slip off (Figure 1). The gesture is a pronounced and integrated into the choreography of the dance, and she simultaneously gives an erotic twist to her body. But the pseudo modesty and extreme artificiality of the gesture draws attention immediately to Marilyn’s sexual excess and the suggestion of the slipped dress is a gesture of “suggestiveness”. She then pauses with her hand on her heart, still looking at Jane, (Figure 2) before turning towards the camera. She moves forward and beckons, looking slightly to one side of the camera (just avoiding the taboo of the lens) but implicitly addressing the spectator (words: “here’s some advice ...”) (Figure 3).



Figure 1. The gesture of stopping her dress from slipping is integrated into the choreography of the dance.



Figure 2. Marilyn pauses with her hand on her heart.

She moves further forward and pauses again (words: “I’d like to give”) before throwing herself forward into the final pose of the close-up (Figure 4). With her wide mouth, half closed eyes and head thrown back, the gesture signifies sex, as desiring and as desirable, ineffable and fleeting, infinitely resonant but without meaning. As she moves fractionally away from the stasis of the pose, her expression mutates very slightly (Figure 5). The initial gestures, such as the beckon, belong to a recognisable vocabulary and work as expressive “add-ons”, in which the body claims, through this physical supplement to language, its own material form of meaning. But all four gestures are distinctively cinematic in their mode of performance, combining the stillness of pose and the movement of dance.



Figure 3. Marilyn moves forward and beckons to the spectator, just avoiding a direct address of the camera.



Figure 4. Marilyn in close-up.

Pasi Valiaho (using Agamben) argues that “... the moving image is gestural by nature. It takes not immovable and rigid forms but material, bodily dynamisms as its subjects” (Valiaho, 2010, p. 17). Going back to the early days of cinema, he points out that in the trick films of the period, those of George Méliès in particular, the cinema takes hold of the animate body: “The moving image does not simply re-present bodily gestures, poses and movements but, instead, harnesses gestures into its into its technological positivity by becoming immanent to them in terms of dynamically modulating the body” (Valiaho, 2010, p. 31). Gradually, across film history, this relationship becomes less flamboyant. Although star performance, particularly female star performance, revolves around pose, the subordination of the animate body to the machine is smoothed out and narrative naturalises cinema’s fundamental unnaturalness. But the



Figure 5. Marilyn in close-up as she moves slightly away from the stasis of the previous pose (Figure 4).

mediality of Marilyn's gestures enhances the medium of cinema itself as process and material texture. The filmic body on display also exhibits the cinematic machine in a fusion of the human and the mechanical. Marilyn's gestures denaturalise the erotic through exaggeration and excess and give a particular edge to her screen appearance. Her gestures are not simply bodily *re-presented* but visibly technologically *harnessed* and mechanically *modulated*. At moments like this, cinema materialises, gesturing to its own being through its privileged relation to the gestures of the figure embodied within it.

While Marilyn quite obviously embodies "attraction" in its sexual sense, her screen presence also conjures up Tom Gunning's use of the term for a cinema that exhibits itself. Furthermore, while any song and dance number puts pressure on the continuities of a narrative, the choreography of the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence exaggerates exhibition and direct address. As Gunning puts it:

It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by the cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise, at the expense of unfolding of a story or creating a diegetic universe. (Gunning, 2006, p. 384)

Marilyn's gestural performance creates, as it were, an attraction within the wider attraction of the Russell/Monroe number. When she throws back her head and takes up the "Marilyn pose", her look seems to travel through the camera and down the years to future audiences and spectators who will continue to feel as though she has transcended time and space to bestow her desiring gaze on them. The "now" set in motion by that cinematic moment continues to reverberate.

As Marilyn slides from one gesture through to the next, she embodies the paradoxical characteristics of the cinema: its fusion of the stillness of the filmstrip and the illusion of movement produced by the projector, as well as its play on the animation of the inanimate. Watching and working on Marilyn's series of gestures in the *Gentlemen*

Prefer Blondes sequence, I came to see her as emblematic of the cinematic paradox and as an exemplary figure of “photogenic”.¹ It seemed as though an analysis that simply theorised Marilyn Monroe in terms of the relationship between body and the medium would overlook the intelligence that she brings to film (which goes beyond, however essential they may be, physical presence and glamour), that is, her “photogenic sensibility”. As though in some way cognisant of the tension between stillness and movement in the cinema, as well as the tension between film and the photograph, she could take up and hold a pose either within the flow of film or the instant of the photograph. In either case, the pose appears to be fleeting, suggesting continuum of movement in the context of the still image or denaturalised stasis within the moving image. Marilyn’s photogenic sensibility inhabits an uncertain space, somewhere between the paradoxical relationship between still and moving images that her “photogenic” touches on.

Of course, Monroe’s performance style changed over the course of her career. My points relate primarily to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, in which she achieved her supremely iconic status as *the* figure of Hollywood, and thus American, glamour. So many of her later parts were bound to be variations, satiric or otherwise, on this image. Quite understandably, Monroe, the person, came to balk at the constraints built into this kind of gestural performance. Jacqueline Rose has pointed out, in an elegant and perceptive analysis, not only that Marilyn Monroe lived out the contradictions demanded by US at a time of national ideological and social contradiction, but also that she lived them with extreme self-awareness. She comments on Monroe’s personal aspirations for her acting career: “She wanted to play the part of a woman who told the world, told men, the truth” (Rose, 2012). Rose evokes Monroe’s conscious attempt to reconcile her own personal awareness of injustice and social oppression with her professional voice. With her turn towards the Actors’ Studio, for instance, she rebelled against her earlier, gestural, mode of performance. In her desire to become an actress rather than a movie star, she aspired to a flesh and blood presence on the screen that would convey interiority, not only of a character, but also of the human, and particularly, the female, body. As Rose points out, Roslyn in *The Misfits* (apart from *The Seven Year Itch*, the only film of the seven since *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in which she was not cast as a showgirl) seemed to offer the opportunity she needed. And this film (directed by John Huston) would be in the tradition of the Lumière brothers, shot on location with an aesthetic of verisimilitude, rather than that of Méliès and the Hollywood studio system.

However, it was during the filming of *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961), that Monroe posed for Magnum photographer Eve Arnold in a series of sessions that encapsulate the paradox of Marilyn as still image. If the artifice of her performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* seems to take her beyond the movement of life that is usually associated with the cinema, the Eve Arnold photographs search out and capture the contingent moment in which Marilyn produces a fluidity of actual movement for the instantaneity of the shutter. Both modes foreground the photographic mechanism, embodied, in turn, by the photogenic sensibility of the star: in the medium of movement, her pose suggests stillness and in the medium of stillness her pose suggests flow. Eve Arnold noticed Marilyn’s affinity with the photographic process. After their last photo session, a reporter waylaid her and asked “What is it like to photograph Marilyn?” She comments:

I waved him off and went on my way. But the question would not be denied. What was it like to photograph her? It was like watching a print come up in the developer. The latent image was there – it needed just her time and temperature controls to bring it into being. It was a stroboscopic display, and all the photographer had to do was stop time at any given instant and Marilyn would bring forth a new image (Arnold, 1992, p. 137).

There are three aspects to the thirty seconds of the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence that I hoped to highlight in the re-mix and all contribute not only to its gestural quality but also illuminate Marilyn's "photogenic sensibility". The first is artifice and her use of cosmetics as mask and masquerade; the second is pose, the way she dismantles her movement into distinct gestures which combines with her ability to embody the cinematic, fusing the animate and the inanimate; and finally, the resonances of the close-up in which intimations of mortality tinge this image of sexual excess.

It took Monroe some time to emerge with the style and appearance that came to connote "Marilyn" and which could be recognised diagrammatically in a few quick marks of a pencil. Her made-up "look" developed gradually in collaboration with Whitey Snyder, her make-up man since her early days at Twentieth Century Fox. Without that distinctive look, she could (and did) move around the streets of say, New York or Los Angeles, without being noticed. Eve Arnold noted

Her make-up was a total mystery. According to Whitey Snyder, her veteran make-up man, she knew more about shadowing her eyes and using special lipstick to keep her mouth glossy than anyone else in the business. These secrets were kept even from him. (Arnold, 1992, p. 27)

While all stars tend to have a recognisable stamp of their own, a look, stance and style, Marilyn's image was flamboyantly "cosmetic". In addition to her artificial blondeness, the features painted onto her face have a glamour of surface reminiscent of a reverse, but equally highly stylised, mask of a clown. While her "painted" features necessarily restrict her range of facial expressions, her blondeness and her use of cosmetics keep vitally alive the luminosity that produced her special rapport with the photographic medium. Without even slowing down the flow of film or freezing a frame, the graphic nature of Marilyn's "mask" creates its own slowness, absorbing the camera's attention as though into a slowness of its own so that her close-ups create a point comparative repose or stasis. A director would be conscious of this effect and one reason, no doubt, for the particular power invested in the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sequence is that Howard Hawks is, in the very opening number of the movie, highlighting Marilyn as "attraction" (in both senses of the word), using the artifice of the dance to give her close-up maximum impact.

Marilyn's movements share something of the graphic quality of her make-up and facial expressions. This is, in the first instance, an attribute of costume and the choreography of the dance, itself highly stylised as a showgirl set piece and thus distinguished from other, more informal, numbers later in the film (such as "Bye bye baby" and "When love goes wrong"), in which the sets have a certain depth and a sketchy dramatic verisimilitude. The red shiny costumes in "Two Little Girls from Little Rock" cling to the bodies of both stars and thus exaggerate movements already choreographed by the dance; but in this sequence Marilyn is literally foregrounded by a particularly denaturalised eroticism. To evoke the, perhaps useful, cliché of the opposition between Méliès and the Lumières: on the one hand, a cinema of contingency, nature (the wind in the trees, a casual and unrehearsed gesture) and bodily coherence; on the other, a cinema of abstraction and the elimination of chance in favour of bodily disintegration

and distance from nature. One flourishes as an analogical and indexical cinema, the other foregrounds cinema as the mechanical and phantasmatic. Pasi Valiaho traces the cinema of illusion and the transformation of the animate into the inanimate to the legacy of eighteenth-century automata. These mechanisms were distinguished precisely by their ability to perform distinct and specific gestures, which, while limited, were marvellous in their imitation of the human. With my delay of “Two Little Girls from Little Rock” sequence, I tried to play on this lineage and to bring out, through Marilyn’s gestural performance, the fact that the beauty of the cinematic illusion is an effect of its mechanisation of the human. While the digitally delayed cinema can exaggerate and reflect on these effects, its technology is at a far remove from cogs and wheels, which, with an intermittent motion, turn the reels of celluloid in a camera or a projector. While so much of cinema has been dedicated to repressing this jerkiness (essential for creating the illusion of movement) it might be the now archaic, automaton-like nature of the mechanical figure that seems so beautiful.

I suggested earlier that final gesture of the sequence, Marilyn’s close-up, evades meaning due to the ineffableness of sex and desire. Her pose is elongated and held still for a second, unaccompanied by a phrase of the song. But in the last few frames she turns slightly aside and, as though her luminosity had been crossed by an almost invisible shadow, her features lose something of the distinctive, iconic Marilyn “look” as though mortality had tinged the of celebration of sexuality. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, the spectator who delays and reflects on this image can easily superimpose the close-up “Marilyns” that Andy Warhol silk-screened as a tribute to her during the four months following her death in August 1962. In these works, he makes the mask of beauty and the death mask uncannily close and the superimposition of the Warhol images onto the then living Marilyn has a sense of deferred meaning, as though the pose prefigured the stillness of death, enhanced, of course, by the spectator’s knowledge of the death that was to come. The shock of her untimely death is now so much part of her mystique and her legacy that the artifice and cosmetic nature of her image seems to be already simultaneously defending against and prefiguring it. This kind of additional knowledge, combined with the passing of time, brings the “shudder at the catastrophe that has already occurred” mentioned by Roland Barthes in relation to Lewis Payne, the young man photographed before his execution. “I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death was the stake” (Barthes, 1981, p. 96). Here, the other cinematic paradox emerges: not only do its machines (camera and projector) animate the inanimate still frames of the film strip and give the illusion of movement to the images of its human players, but the illusion also keeps the dead alive, as they perfectly perform and re-perform their once upon a time living gestures.

Coda

Whitey Snyder tells this story about Marilyn Monroe. While *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was shooting, she had to go into hospital. When she was preparing to leave, she called Whitey to do her make-up “so when she met the public or the press or anybody, she’d look alright”. She asked: “Will you promise me that if something happens to me in this world, when I die, promise me you’ll do my make-up so I look good when I leave.” He answered “If I get you while you’re warm, Marilyn”. She gave him a money-clip that said: Whitey Dear While I’m still warm Marilyn. When she died, Joe DiMaggio

called him and said “Whitey, you promised”. So he went to the mortuary and did her make-up for the last time (Crown, 1987, p. 210).

This anecdote, to my mind, gives a poignant verisimilitude to Marilyn’s “photogenic sensibility”, almost as though she grasped the relationship between the cosmetic mask, the photographic image and the mask of death. But it also extends the idea of gesture to this “exchange of gestures” between the two people who collaborated to create the Marilyn close-up, the emblematic summation of Hollywood glamour. Ironically, this globally recognised image of Hollywood might have helped to conceal the decline of the studio system that was taking place precipitously during the 1950s. It may be due to her awareness of these changing times, and the demands of a “new” cinema, that Monroe worked hard to change her sex symbol status, associated with the studio system, for the naturalised gestures and expressive interiority associated with the Actors’ Studio.

Note

1. “Photogenic” was the term used by certain French avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s to describe the way that the camera could use its mechanical properties and its relation with light, shade and the materiality of celluloid to transform ordinary things or, indeed, people into something specifically cinematic.

Notes on contributor

Laura Mulvey has been writing about film and film theory since the mid-1970s. She has published *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989, new updated edition 2009), *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996, new edition 2013), *Citizen Kane* (1996, new edition 2012), *Death Twenty-Four Times a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006). In the late 1970s and early 1980s she co directed six films with Peter Wollen, including *Riddles of the Sphinx* (British film Institute 1977). With artist /filmmaker Mark Lewis she co-directed *Disgraced Monuments* (Channel Four 1994) with whom she has also made *23 August 2008* (2013). She is a professor of Film and Media Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London and the director of Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image.

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