The autistic gesture: film as neurological training

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by Janet Harbord

Abstract

This article explores the co-constitution of autism in the twentieth century with a normative concept of gesture and body language. As an archive of bodies in movement, cinema provides a database of gestures, their changing modality, and cultural distinctiveness across the course of a century. A lesser known cinema of medical and psychiatric film testifies to a longstanding fascination with the a-typical gesture as an optic for observation, documentation, and diagnosis. An identification of idiosyncratic motor co-ordination in the early twentieth century coincided with the rise of neurology, obtaining a different focus in the postwar period in an enquiry into autistic presence. Produced as an outside, autistic gesture, provides an external limit-case of what can be known about the development of the human subject.

Keywords

autism, body language, medical film, psychiatry, gesture

In their eloquent introduction to an anthology devoted to the study of gestures in film, video, and drawing, Grønstad, Gustafsson, and Vågnes capture the poles that the term gesture straddles. ‘At once a codified and natural expression, the gestural is peculiarly and somewhat ambiguously situated between the realm of the discursive and the realm of the instinctual,’ they write, ‘between the culture-specific and the universal and between the corporeal and the visual.’[1] Gesture’s promise and its potency in the present critical moment arises no doubt from its interstitial positioning between oppositional accounts of the body and media (and cinema in particular), with a concomitant ability to illuminate cultural specificity and register historical change.[2] Descriptions of cinema as a great archive of

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gesture testify to the legibility of body language across time and to the shifting registers of meaning within which gestures are understood.

Yet as valuable as a revised sense of gesture's significance to a range of disciplines and media practices undoubtedly is, there remains a certain opacity to accounts of the gesturing body, or rather the qualities, dimensions, tendencies, capacities, and perceived limitations of particular bodies as they enact gesture. Intersecting with disability studies, attention to gesture in the domain of impairment provides for a different set of questions about the definition of gesture and its value as a critical term. That gesture has provided an optic to determine a body's 'ability', giving rise to a method of isolation, diagnosis, and treatment in clinical conditions, (gesture as symptom) may be the spring board for enquiry into how the relationship of body and brain are fashioned through gesture. This article attends to the semiosis of gesture in clinical conditions in which the body's movement is deemed to be an indicator of interior states of abnormality, the indices of psychic difference requiring psychiatric treatment. Broadly, the rise of psychiatry in the early twentieth century accompanies the development of cinema; their dual crafting of what constitutes an intelligible language of the body, whilst conducted in separate institutional settings, I will argue, is one of mutual correspondence.

Cinema as a communicative crisis

One of the few accounts to profile the capture of the body as a prominent feature of cinema's emergence is Agamben's brief essay 'Notes on Gesture',[3] in which cinema's complicity with, and co-constitution through, a biopolitical paradigm is sketched as a new genealogy for the medium. Agamben's supplementary proto-cinematic history draws into relation an experimental late nineteenth-century neurology with motion study photography, both issuing an effortful attempt to decompose the body's movement. In the work of French physician Gilles de la Tourette, Agamben identifies 'a gaze that is already a prophecy of what cinematography would later become'.[4] Tourette's method of smearing the patient's feet with

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sesquioxide powder and requiring the subject to walk a distance of eight meters along a line drawn on a scroll of paper to make visible the particular gait of each subject resonates with the photographic serialisation of bodies in motion produced by Eadweard Muybridge at the University of Pennsylvania in 1884. Muybridge's motion studies, situated at the intersection of physiognomy and aesthetics, mark a popular fascination with gesture. Gathered into large bound volumes and sold to private collectors interested in and perhaps entertained by people rehearsing everyday tasks, these figures appear to Agamben as 'the happy and visible twins of the unknown and suffering creatures that had left those traces' on paper.[5] The correlation that is drawn between the 'twins' is suggestive of more than a fascination with the body in movement; the study of bodies in both the clinic and the photographic studio seeks to understand the efficiency of the body as an instrument of productivity and its effectiveness as a site of intelligibility.

There is a degree of affinity between Agamben's account of a communicative crisis of the body, described as a highly visible 'generalized disaster' for the realm of gesture, and Vilém Flusser's longer meditation, *Gestures*[6] (published in the same year as Agamben's essay, 1991). In Flusser's distinction between movements that are functional, driven by a means to an end, and movements that in meeting resistance enact communication through a speculative means, there is an echo of Agamben's insistence on gesture as the illumination of the body's medial potential. Both writers define gesture as such as an action free of causality and finality. Flusser writes, 'gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool attached to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation'.[7] Where Agamben's definition is given an ethical dimension in its exhibition of a communicative capacity oriented towards the other, Flusser's version promotes a type of speculative gesture that tests the possibilities for making a communication and of assessing its value (a familiar appeal in Flusser's work for a method of interpretation over description, the latter promoting an acceptance of 'what is'). In each account, the capacity for meaningful gesture is modulated by industrialization, resulting in Agamben's account in a ticking,

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syncopated body in motion, and in Flusser's work a passive body subjected to rationalised purpose.

If both of these engagements with gesture only gloss the surface of the late nineteenth century industrial period, their respective theses on gesture can be cross-referenced to more focussed historical accounts of the body at this time. Anson Rabinbach's study of fatigue during this period, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (1990), posits that a physical (gestural) incoherence of bodies brought about by extreme tiredness was the focus of investigation in discourses as wide ranging as biology, physiognomy, and politics, interpreted as a symptom of the moral infirmity of the population.[8] In Leo Charney's study of inertia, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity and Drift* (1998), the cinematic image of the body is ghostly, lacks substance, and haunts the modern subject as a being untethered and without effect. The relation of self to the image as modeled and co-constituted in cinema features in Pasi Väliaho's *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture circa 1900* (2010), in which he interprets late nineteenth-century techniques for capturing gestures as the separation of knowledge from self-knowledge.[9] A historical reading of the moment in which cinema emerges points to an etiolated human body, exhausted by its encounter with modern machines through which it has been recalibrated. Reminiscent of Chaplin's factory worker in *Modern Times*, gestures no longer communicate communicability but relay staccato erratic responses within a milieu of distractions.

The body as a mis-firing, ticcing incidence of effects makes an artful appearance in entertainment cinema whose silence foregrounds the figural comedy of mistakes (that might otherwise be labeled missed takes). These bodies are ultimately resilient, surviving through an openness to contingencies that provides them with a corporeal supple flexibility, fixed as emblematic images of the age. Yet a different genre of what we may tentatively call gestural-enquiry-films exists simultaneously but seemingly without contact, in the enclosure of a neurological clinical setting. Directly influenced by Jean Martin Charcot's theatrical investigations, a number of neurologists (some of

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whom had studied under Charcot) established their own research practices using film to record the movements of their patients in clinics in Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century. The practice of Gheorghe Marinescu in Romania bridges the study of hysteria in Paris and broader neurology. By 1898 Marinescu was filming his patients' problems with movement, gesture, and mimicry, according to Virgilio Tosi, and drawing on these studies in published accounts in *La semaine medicale*.[10]

In addition, Camillo Negri in Milan, Vincenzo Neri in Bologna, and slightly later Rudolf Magnus and Gysbertus Rademaker in the Netherlands and Jean Commandon in France, filmed the gestures of patients whose control was impaired or whose gestures were unintelligible. In addition to the theatrical aspects of clinical settings in this period, detailed vibrantly by Georges Didi-Huberman (who describes himself as *almost* compelled to read hysteria as a chapter in the history of art), neurology as a relatively new science was required to evolve its own integrative methodology, of which film was a part.[11] In Stephen Casper's account of the emergence of neurology as a science, inaugurated in Britain in 1886 with the founding of the Neurological Society of London, there was no attempt to homogenise its community of practitioners, indeed 'the diversity of its professional membership was the society's central strength and the challenge of its subject'.[12] The incorporation of film as a new method of research and enquiry in a field of knowledge equally new and in the process of constructing its own parameters is both inventive and bold.

Of particular note is Vincenzo Neri's use of film over a period of forty years, beginning in 1908. Neri's desire for an articulation of a-typical gesture led to the construction of an archive of images, films, and diagrammatic representation in the drive to capture the manifestation of a disease. Neri's method has affinities with the practices of both Muybridge and Marey: shot against a black background, the figure is isolated from the distractions of context. In a number of films there is a sense of theatrical display as the patient is situated centre-stage, as it were, and facing the camera, clearly in

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some instances enjoying the rehearsal of the a-typical gesture: a woman's smile as she exhibits her unruly arm movement seems to invite the viewer to share her amusement at its autonomous, repetitive motion. A film captures the neurologist's assistant within the frame, sitting in between patients leading a series of actions that they, it would seem, are invited to mimic. Each patient attempts to follow the arm lifts, the clapping of hands, the touching of their own nose, yet their attempts at mimicry register as vaguely comic parodies of the movements of the assistant. The aberrant gestures Neri puts on display, argues Väliaho, reveal a quality of automation, isolating 'a non-human dimension of the senseless, the involuntary and the automatic within the human itself'. That is, Neri's films not only evidence an intense interest in the visual documentation of aberrant gestures but mark the political capture of biological life in the designation on the animal within the human.[13]

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Fig. 1: Still from the Vincenzo Neri medical film and photographic collection, Italy (1907-1956).

If these films appear to embrace a generalist approach to the study of a-typical gestures, Neri's work involved a more detailed forensic approach to the study of disease in which the film stock itself was a critical tool. Oliver Gaycken in *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science*, traces a correspondence between the forensic method of detection in popular novels between 1910-14 and scientific film of the period. A fascination with the potency of a singular detail to reveal the truth of a crime or science scene, he argues, enacts a lesson in the deceitfulness of appearances.[14] A forensic approach also characterises Neri's method of what we might call the detection of a pathology in a close analysis of the negative of the film. The identification of a seemingly minor detail as the key to a fuller knowledge of the subject to hand resonates with both the method of detection popularized through the character of Sherlock Holmes, and an emergent psychoanalytic approach. Yet where the practices of detection and psychoanalysis were archaeological in the sense of constructing an historical event from fragments, Neri's method concerned the replay of the past as present, a capture of the body in

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motion that could be invoked over and again in search of clues. Neri's method of detection was not one of reconstruction, but the isolation of an instant within the continuum of movement, scoring the film stock with pen and pencil to identify the moment in which the symptom seemed to reveal itself. In summary, Neri's neurological enquiry establishes repeated gestural movements as signatures of some kind, the meaning of which it becomes the task of medical film to determine, situating gestures within a paradigm of relative intelligibility.

The genealogy of cinema includes not only a popular fascination with moving bodies, but with this question: 'What does the body signify through its movement?' It is a question that conditions the filming of bodies in the clinic *as well as* bodies of actors gathered in the film studio; it is a question that troubles the utopian modernist wish for film to provide a universal language of images triumphant in their communicative capacity over verbal difference, a trope recently critiqued by Abraham Geil as the dream of a mono-language that admits no alterity. 'A language implies not only external differences from other language systems', he writes, 'but also of internal differences from itself borne in the negative traces of its own historical change and becoming.'[15] Against such ambitions of universalism for cinema, these early medical films testify to a relatively discrete enclosure of a gestural language that is reluctant to disclose its code. The question of how meaning can take place without *spoken* language is the paradoxical strength and limit of early cinema, for which the language *of the body* is a solution. The body of early cinema bears the weight of signification, which in turn I would argue produces a series of articulations and foundational divisions between intelligible and unintelligible bodies. As a standard language of cinematic gesture stabilised, it produced dialectically and in mirror form an unintelligible body, the body of the autistic child,that defies communicative injunction.

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Autism as a foundational exclusion

Autism is not a named condition in early medical films although the term is articulated as early as 1911, emerging in the period of modernism in proximity to psychiatric discourses and to cinema. Bonnie Evans writes that autism ‘was, and has always remained, the kernel of all descriptions of the development of modern subjectivity and self-identity’,[16] a type of external limit-case of what can be known about the development of the human subject. When the Swiss psychologist Eugene Bleuler named a condition ‘autism’ in 1911, it was a contraction of the term ‘autoeroticism’, used by Freud to ‘describe hallucinatory thinking in conjunction with self-soothing in a stage that preceded the infant’s engagement with external reality’.[17] In this initial iteration, writes Ian Hacking, autism referred to ‘a characteristic family of symptoms in the group of schizophrenias’.[18] The condition typified the symptoms of severe cases of schizophrenia where the infant’s inner world of excessive symbolic life was characterised by hallucinations and unconscious fantasy, and an idiosyncratic withdrawal from the real.

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A second definition of autism was put into circulation towards the end of the Second World War, in 1943, by the child psychiatrist Leo Kanner, and whilst his method was one of written ethnographic description, the attention to gestural behavior was influential for the use of film in clinical settings in the two decades that followed. Working at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Kanner closely observed eleven children over a period of five years: Donald, Frederick, Richard, Paul, Barbara, Virginia, Herbert, Alfred, Charles, John, and Elaine. In his analysis, Kanner drew on photographic and written documents provided by the childrens’ parents. The findings were published as ‘Autistic disturbances of affective contact’ in the journal *Nervous Child*, providing a definition widely regarded to be the basis for contemporary understandings of autism, a ‘pure culture’ example, as Kanner described the condition. The features that secured a diagnosis of autism and that the children shared included a reluctance to interact physically with adults, minimal capacity for communication and language, repetitive actions bordering on obsessive behaviours, and a marked sensitivity to stimuli of the environment. The term ‘autism’ in Kanner’s paper is, according to

Evans, ‘reformulated from a description of someone who fantasized excessively to one who did not fantasize at all’.[19] From having an excessive inner world (hallucinatory thought) for Bleuler, the autistic subject emerged in the mid-century in Kanner’s description, and a year later in a related paper by Hans Asperger in Austria, as lacking imagination.[20]

Stuart Murray in *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Observation* argues that Kanner’s paper described not only a condition but a distinct ‘autistic presence’: ‘The hand-flapping, self-stimulating, echolalic young child displaying no interest in others and obsessed with rituals is possibly the most obvious personification of the condition, the “pure” example of which Kanner speaks.’[21] Observation focused on a range of behaviours in which the gestures of the children were prominent. Of Donald Tripp, a child studied by Kanner from the age of 5 to 11, it is noted that he

> made stereotyped movements with his fingers, crossing them about in the air. He shook his head from side to side, whispering or humming the same three note tune. He spun with great pleasure anything he could seize upon to spin.[22]

The children, who Kanner describes in the opening sentence using that old-fashioned plain speak, as ‘peculiar’, reorient anthropocentric relationality in exhibiting a preoccupation with objects and a lack of motivation towards people. The ‘peculiar’ alternative presence of the autistic child who fails to interact with other human beings, who prefers not to, Kanner writes up towards the end of the paper in the statement, ‘He just is there’, a description that Murray finds echoed in Asperger’s observation, ‘The autist is only himself.’[23]

The ethnographic method of observation that Kanner in particular favoured describes the children in visual terms; indeed, as language was not a secure channel of communication with the children, Kanner’s account can only emphasise the behaviour in physical terms. One of the defining features of autism as it emerges in the 1940s is a condition of a-typical gesture that effects a disturbance of the

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normative visual field. As a condition with multiple and complex features, autism requires pages of description in written form, but film appears to register its strangeness directly and with economy. Gesture features prominently in clinical recordings in the 1950s and 1960s in Britain and in the United States. *Aspects of Childhood Psychosis*, from 1957, filmed at the Maudsley Hospital in London under the direction of neurologist Edgar J. Anthony, is possibly the first medical film to name autism specifically. A silent film shot on 16mm stock and running to 28 minutes, it provides a visual report from a study of 70 children classified broadly as psychotic with more specific medical terms applied on a case by case basis. The film is constructed editorially as a catalogue of behaviours each prefaced by an intertitle card bearing clinical description. These written texts provide a classification, followed by a short animated extract to model the behavior.

There is an economy to the film's silent, visual form, dividing and editing sequences of behavior to illustrate medical diagnostic categories and to suggest in some instances their affinity. The multiple divisions and subsideries of psychotic conditions that in written text would appear quite abstract are given thumbnail visual representation. Voiding the social and institutional context in which filming takes place in cutting away from images of the environment, and at times from the person of the child, the film extracts and isolates gestures as symptomatic. The title card 'Replacement activity or hoarding' is illustrated by a short sequence of a girl's hands finishing an arrangement of aligning objects in size sequence. Whilst we see her hands illustrating the activity (although this barely seems like hoarding), her face is out of frame: the symptom defaces the girl. The momentary exchange that we are witness to when a book is taken from a boy provides no 'before' to the event but lingers on the after-effect of repeated face stroking, whilst the repetitive rocking side to side of a boy who stands next to the sandpit is given longer duration than the previous two shots as he looks into camera. In this example, the boy's breaking of a rule of filmic language and bodily protocol in the returned look supplements the psychiatric interpretation of the

intertitle card; that is, 'we' as viewers of the film can experience his aggression.

The argument that I am making in relation to this and a number of other medical films of this decade is that their meaning derives in part from the use of standard film language to foreground, or throw into relief, the aberrant gesture of the autistic subject. This becomes further pronounced in the next decade when filming autism serves a different purpose, moving away from clinical enquiry and towards public information, co-terminous with new models of social welfare and legislative changes in Britain (in the wake of the Mental Health Act that in 1959 had brought about the closure of so-called deficiency institutions and aslyums), and in the United States signaling the emergence of political lobbying and advocacy. Most notably, the film *A Time for Georgia* (1969), an award-winning documentary film about a four-year-old girl with autism filmed over a period of six months at her day school, is an empathetic portrait whose actions are interpreted by a sympathetic narrator. The film's opening signals this shift; the sequence has a soft musical accompaniment as the face of the child is studied in close-up, notably whilst the child is still and displays no particularly 'notable' behavior. The importance of the film and its capture of autism in children is evidenced by its premiere at the Whitehouse Conference on Children in 1970, part of a series of conferences devoted to what were considered to be the most compelling issues of the day.

Fig. 2: Still from *A Time for Georgia* (Peter Scheer, 1969).

In the same year in Britain the film *Illustrations of Childhood Autism* (1969), directed by Dermod McCarthy and Harold Lowenstein at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, has the benefit of a narrator who serves not only to decode the gestures of the children observed, but to interject a knowing 'insider' element. Indicating a more personal or 'humanising' approach, the children are referred to by name, and shot typology again includes the close-up, privileging the face and expression, yet the filmic language of empathy is set up to fail. In the opening moments of the film, two children play with water, clearly

entertained by the sensuous feel and flow of liquid, the second a younger child who seems out of sorts. The use of a slow zoom towards the face appears to invite the viewer to expect increased emotional proximity, yet the narrator's parsing of the child's behaviour directs our attention specifically to the gaze of the child in an interaction with a carer. The child is looking towards the woman but does not make direct eye contact. The forensic isolation of this and one other moment in a pause arrests the flow of the film to reveal a non-alignment. It is a moment where the expectation of the entertainment film drives the medical interpretation, for the child's gaze can be seen to miss the shot/reverse shot structure of relationality. 'Is this you and me?', the narrator asks, answering herself, 'No, the gaze just misses.'

The concept of gesture is critical in the use of film to discern and define neurotypicality in the postwar period. Where autism is typically defined in psychiatric literature in relation to deficits (language, relationality, etc.), the filming of gestures provides an evidential foundation of difference identified through the body of the autistic person: empirically stated, autistic gesture just is. The gesture that does not necessarily privilege a human counterpart, that is not readily decodable within a system of social meaning, that resides at the cusp of the social and the instinctual in flapping, waving, and rocking, becomes a highly visible feature of studied behavior. The isolation of autism is captured effectively not only as a documentary record of communicative lack, but as a departure from a standard film language through which the body in motion is made intelligible. The filming of the face as a site of registration of internal thoughts to be discerned by the viewer, for example, privileges a dominant inferential model that, as Steven Eastwood argues, renders the autistic subject, who does not infer meaning, lacking.[24] The ways in which medical films operate, variously inflected through their design as pedagogical tools, public information, and serving advocacy, collectively establish and dialectically affirm the major register of neurotypicality. This in a sense is the 'productive' outcome of the registration of autism on film that crafts a positive presence through a negative rendition of being, a presence that 'just is there'.

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When Stuart Murray writes about the distinct presence that characterises autistic difference from the time of Kanner's account onwards, he finds a connection with the literary figure of Bartleby.[25] When Herman Melville writes as a description of the scrivener, argues Murray, 'Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from original sources', he is a literal version of himself. Murray notes the affinities with autism in Melville's description of the scrivener: Bartleby avoids eye contact, his voice is flute-like, he works mechanically (he is after all a copyist in a law firm), his words are famously minimal, and he seems 'absolutely alone in the universe'. Yet his presence disturbs, confounds, infuriates, entices, his singularity producing a multitude of responses. Bartleby's repetitive response of 'I would prefer not to' to the command to work has attracted significant philosophical commentary from Giorgio Agamben and Giles Deleuze, yet it is a phrase that has a differently inflected interest in the context of autism: Bartleby's is not a wilful defence (*I will not*), nor a refusal based on ability (*I cannot*), but a preference that jams the channels of communication and reciprocal relationality. And we must remember that Bartleby ends his days in the dead letter office, the place for which lost communications are destined.

If, following Murray's reading, Bartleby shares affinities with an autistic presence and disinclination to engage in social (and economic) exchange, how might this inflect prevalent concepts of gesture? In Agamben's account, gesture is both expropriated by biopower and is the site of a reclamation of the political, as Deborah Levitt argues: 'ultimately, in this attempted reclamation, gesture provides an opening to the future, to the coming community as the fulfilment of non-statist, non-teleological, non-identitarian politics, that is of politics as a pure mediality, means without end'.[26] Yet the path that reclamation follows through gesture is one of the communication of a communicability, the exhibition of the body as the location where singularity meets collective instanciation of meaning. The autistic subject however does not fulfil the communicative promise upon which a coming community is founded.

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Similarly, autism troubles Flusser's notion of gesture as an act produced in the struggle between freedom and resistance, a criterion he uses to separate corporeal responses from true gestures: 'Body movements for which an objective explanation is adequate, and that therefore are not expressions of freedom (e.g., closing the eyes in strong light or clenching the fist in pain) are not gestures, even if, phenomenally, they recall gestures vividly.'[27] Bartleby, on the contrary, confounds the binary of resistance-surrender, defying the terms upon which a political philosophy rests, and in this more than any other sense he is emblematic of the autist. That autism troubles gesture in its philosophical designation is but one part of the story. For autistic gesture provides also a provocation, a more suggestive and challenging definition of the term that departs from the precepts of agency and autonomy underpinning notions of normative, 'healthy' subjecthood. Gesture as it is coupled with autism, that is, presents an opening onto other modalities, other speculative ways of being in the world.

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Film as a departure from neurotypical life

A contrasting approach to the capture of autistic gesture in the postwar period is found in the work of French writer, activist, and proponent of anti-psychiatry practice in the 1960s and 1970s, Fernand Deligny. Trained as a special education instructor for young people in psychiatric asylums, Deligny (a friend of Felix Guattari) was opposed to institutions, and in 1948 with his company of fellow activists he set up a number of *tentatives* (attempts), first in Paris with state funding, and after funds were withdrawn in rural parts of France as small experiments in living with young autistic people. In describing his approach as a departure, he writes: 'We did not take the children's ways of being as scrambled, coded messages addressed to us.'[28] Deligny's method was, as Leon Hilton remarks, one of suspending analytical models of interpretation as far as possible, 'so that something else such as the flicker of a gesture, "the remainder, resistant to any comprehension" might begin to come into focus'.[29] He used methods that he named arachnean in reference to the

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construction of provisional networks where the distinction between the spider and web, and act and product, were indiscernible.

Deligny's feature-length documentary *La Moindre Geste* (The Slightest Gesture, 1971) follows a young man and his friend, escapees from a local institution, through a rural landscape documenting their encounters and exchanges with the environment. The film, or what David H. Fleming lyrically calls a loosely structured ballade film,[30] exemplifies Deligny's approach to living with autistic children, in which documentation is part of a shared project of making a visualisation of activity that is not however to be decoded to reveal a further meaning. Drawing in cartographic fashion the paths and routes taken by the children in the home and in the landscape, Deligny's wander line maps (*lignes d'erre*) are traces of activity without recourse to language and explanation. If filming offered another possibility to Deligny for following and tracing the movement of the resident children, the open-ended reel of film performing a line of departure, it was a medium into which he pasted drawings, diagrams, and maps. The repetitious circles of movement on the maps could be reproduced with the movements of the camera, at times circling 360 degrees, similar to refrains in musical scores, or the ritornello in Deleuze and Guattari's lexicon.

Fig. 3: Still from *La Moindre Geste* (Fernand Deligny, Josee Manenti, Jean-Pierre Daniel, 1971).

The film works of Deligny not only expose an unlived potentiality of cinema but reveal the tenets of the cinema that we have as investments in a model of psychological depth and subjective autonomy. Gesture, that is, not only communicates to the other (in normative entertainment film) but communicates to the other an internal world, an interiority expressed in the fusion of bodily and verbal language. Leon Hilton comments of *La Moindre Geste*:

> The film stages a refusal of the psychological conventions of cinematic identification, and what Deleuze and Guattari termed

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> the 'archaeological conception of psychoanalysis', with its reliance on the interior, hidden depth of the unconscious.[31]

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Deligny's diagrammatic version of gestures, in contrast, gives emphasis to the surface rather than depth, to space rather than time, to following above direction. It exposes a potential cinema in which drama is mitigated and sensation is paramount, where the significance of human interaction is second to the sensible registration of the environment. Gesture in a universe of *tentatives* is structured as either customary activity (the children's movements around a kitchen workspace) or gestures of drift or *ligne d'erre* (in the rugged landscape of the Cevannes hills), where the latter operate without communicative intent and without pre-ordained purpose. Gesture figures in Deligny's works as a form of experimentation, an inhabiting of the world without the primacy of language and symbolisation, and yet avoiding the trap of the noble primitive. As Bertrand Ogilvie writes in a recent English translation of Deligny's writings: 'it is not on the side of autism that one finds wildness [*sauvagerie*] but rather in civilization and its most characteristic gestures'.[32]

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The place of Deligny's work within the anti-psychiatry movement has recently gained prominence in critical accounts linking disability studies with philosophy, leading to a wider recognition of the influence of his practice on the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari, specifically the formulation of the body without organs and deterritorialisation in *Mille Plateaux*. A less well-known pocket of experimental filmmaking oriented by the autistic gesture comes through the practice of Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom. In *Scrapbook* (2014), Hoolboom revisits footage created in 1967 in the Broadview Residential Centre in Ohio, an institution for children with learning difficulties. The footage is the outcome of a collaboration between Jeffrey Paull, an Ontario-based filmmaker, and the resident children who are joined in a project to make photographic pictures of each other. The footage captures the physical movements of a group of children engaged with a filmmaker in a mutually exploratory enquiry into how to look and how to be seen. In a similar exploratory

mode as Deligny's *tentatives*, Paull creates situations for the question of how to receive gestures made by and offered to subjects with fundamentally different sensory and cognitive ways of being in the world. The footage evidences Paull's method of placing a static camera in a room with the children, presenting the possibility of their engagement with the technology on their own terms and as a material object, one that can be approached and inspected. The rhythmic quality of the footage is dictated by the children's approach to and away from the camera in a manner somewhat similar to *lignes d'errant*, producing their own forms of close-up for the viewer, reversing the terms of camera operation.

Fig. 4: Still from *Scrapbook* (Mike Hoolboom, 2014).

Hoolboom's project almost 50 years later was to engage someone from the original group of residents to view the footage. Donna Washington, a former resident of the Centre from 1966 to 1978, responded to an online announcement and agreed to view the materials in several sittings. Her responses form the script for the film's voiceover, spoken by an actor at Washington's request, and inspire the audio-track constructed by Hoolboom, of high-pitched sounds and dissonant tones. The voiceover simultaneously ruminates on the experience of being taught to see a face, yet the version offered fashions this event in its own terms; the face is both something to be seen and to be received, it makes an impression, it commands an opening in the one receiving. The voiceover, responding to the children's faces on film and the memory of making the film, runs thus:

> Jeff told me there's a part of the face that's always opening.
> It's the part of the face that hasn't decided yet.
> Maybe that's how Jeff and I became friends.
> We showed each other the parts of our faces that hadn't decided yet.
> What Jeff showed me with his camera is that you don't have to get stuck in someone else's face.
> You can try on one face after another, until you find your own.

It was kind of fun.
And then we realized that we're all part of the same face.
And I didn't have to be afraid of that.
And he didn't have to be afraid of that.[33]

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Washington's arresting articulation of the face as it appears in film is resonant with early film theory, the unexpected fizzing prose of Epstein for example, where the features of faciality are not those of representation but a mobile surface. In contrast to the expressive semiotic value of the face in conventional terms, through an autistic lens the face is the site of an emergence, a process that does not arrive or conclude but remains in a state of 'undecidedness'. The description testifies to a state of mobility where intention is notably absent and where the agency of decision-making is deferred, where the boundary between self and other is in a state of flux.

In conclusion, as an archive of bodies in movement cinema provides a database of gestures, their changing modality and cultural distinctiveness, across the course of a century. Not only entertainment films, but a lesser known cinema of medical and psychiatric films testifies to a longstanding fascination with the gestural body and a compulsion to record it. The question of how communication takes place between people on screen was, from the inception of cinema, a problem to be addressed and resolved. A subtext, or even by-product, to the production of an effective and efficient cinematic gesture is a medical annotation of bodily dysfunction and idiosyncratic motor co-ordination. Arising in the early twentieth century with the discourse of neurology and what became known as the 'psy' discourses, a filmic fascination with autistic gesture obtained a particular momentum again in the postwar period when film as observation shifted to a more empathetic and yet normatively driven advocating of rights. That language acquisition became and remains for the time being the focus of interventionist approaches to autism is perhaps not unconnected to the triumph of an entertainment cinema where the rehearsed coincidence of gesture with spoken language remains key.[34]

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‘Autism is instructive’, writes Ian Hacking.[35] His comment refers to the way in which autism allows social constructivist and medical accounts of the subject to co-exist, but it may also be taken to apply to cinema. That is, autism as a state of being presents difference in a pure cultural form, as Kanner would have it, and provides a provocation to rethink not only a normopathically oriented body language but to revise, renew, and expand the language of cinema outside of the psychological conventions of cinematic identification. The significance of bringing autism to bear on the subject of gesture is not to be found in the drive for inclusivity and diversity that circles back to support a liberal agenda of pluralism. Autism’s instructive quality is the opportunity for the neurotypical to realise the narrow cast of visual codification that conditions cinema, a tool to look through rather than to look at.

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Author

Janet Harbord is Professor of Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London. She is the author of a number of books including *Film Cultures* (2002), *The Evolution of Film* (2007), *Chris Marker: La Jetee* (2009), and *Ex-centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* (2016), and co-author or editor of four others. She is currently working with Steven Eastwood and Bonnie Evans on the Wellcome Trust project ‘Autism through Cinema’, researching the relationships between medical films and entertainment films in early and postwar cinema.

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[1] Grønstad & Gustafsson & Vågnes 2017, p. 6.
[2] See also Chare & Watkins 2017.
[3] Agamben 2000, pp. 49-62.
[4] Ibid., p. 49.
[5] Ibid., p. 50.
[6] Flusser's text was translated belatedly in 2014, impacting on recent debates of gesture from the position of a philosophy of communication and technology.
[7] Flusser 2014, p. 2.
[8] Rabinbach 1990, p. 43.
[9] See also Väliaho 2014.
[10] Tosi's gloss of medical filmmaking asserts the value of medical film in providing documentation that can be returned to and re-assessed, a practice that Hoolboom enacts on Paull's footage of residents in care in the 1960s.
[11] Huberman 2007, p. 4.
[12] Casper 2014, p. 37.
[13] Väliaho, 2014, p. 118.
[14] Gaycken 2015. See particularly Chapter 5.
[15] Geil 2018, p. 513.
[16] Evans 2017, p. 5.
[17] Ibid., p. 42.
[18] Hacking 1999, p. 114.
[19] Ibid., p. 41.
[20] Asperger 1944. See Murray's discussion of the coincidental findings of Kanner and Asperger.
[21] Murray 2008, p. 30.
[22] Ibid., p. 219.
[23] Ibid., p. 32.
[24] Eastwood 2015.
[25] Murray 2008, pp. 51-60.
[26] Levitt 2008, p. 194.
[27] Flusser 2014, p. 165.
[28] Deligny 2015, p. 49.
[29] Hilton 2015.
[30] Fleming 2017, p. 84.
[31] Hilton 2015.

[32] Ogilvie 2015, p. 9.
[33] Hoolboom, 2014. This voiceover is taken from the final section of the film.
[34] See Lisa Cartwright's discussion of language acquisition, autism, and spectatorship (2008).
[35] Hacking 1999, p. 116.