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'Pure gesturality': Exploring cinematic encounters through exotic dancing

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, not least as a response to the terrible conflict which had just come to an end, increasing political actions were taken in pursuit of the ideals of peace and egalitarianism, or of affirming the rights of individuals and minorities.[1] In October 1945, the United Nations was established in New York; in May 1948 the Hague Congress set out a first road map for the constitution of the European Union; in December of that same year, at the UN headquarters in Paris, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed, the first point of which stressed the need for a spirit of brotherhood between free and equal peoples. Those years also witnessed an acceleration in decolonisation processes, which led certain territories, especially in Africa and Asia, to struggle for self-determination. While this goal was rarely achieved in a peaceful way, the populations involved could rely on widespread international consensus: even strands of the public and certain political movements in the colonising countries supported the colonised nations' demand for liberation in the name of justice and equality.[2]

Besides, this period offered fresh encounters between cultures, as well as fresh opportunities to provide a more detailed representation of such cultures. Alongside the spread of increasingly swift means of transport and the restructuring of the tourism industry,[3] film cameras became lighter and more affordable. The cinema produced in the West returned to being one of the privileged means of illustrating 'other places', as it had been at the turn of the twentieth century.[4] From ethnographic films to newsreels, from exotic Hollywood films to amateur 16mm movies, from documentaries to televi-

sion reporting, this period witnessed an exponential increase in representations of travel(-ling bodies), which I here wish to study from a 'gestural' perspective. In many of these works the practice of encountering others seems to revolve around rites, dances, postures, and movements. The ethno-fiction produced during anthropological expeditions at the time – such as *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1937-52, directed by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson) and *Sous les masques noirs* (*Under the Black Masks*, 1938, directed by Marcel Griaule) – or films by Jean Rouch such as *Initiation à la danse des possédés* (*Initiation into Possession Dance*, 1949), *Les Maîtres Fous* (*The Mad Masters*, 1954), and *Moi, un noir* (*I, a Negro*, 1958); or, again, in a very different context, the many adventure movies that offer an adaptation of exotic literature by giving it (more or less) natural settings, as in the case of *Aloma of the South Seas* (1941, directed by Alfred Santell), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944, directed by Arthur Lubin), *Slave Girl* (1947, directed by Charles Lamont), *Jungle Jim* (1948, directed by William Berke), *Princess of the Nile* (1954, directed by Harmon Jones), and *Son of Sinbad* (1955, directed by Ted Tetzlaf).

While for reasons of space I cannot offer an exhaustive overview of filmic representations of 'exotic' lands, the above-mentioned films are of help in addressing the question of whether a body that moves on set can serve as a medium to fill communication gaps. They also help in considering if a body may work as a universal vehicle to replace verbal language, particularly in contexts where unexpected cultural untranslatabilities may emerge. I will examine three dance sequences from three films set in India, which are among the most representative of a strand within the travel genre explored by many European directors in the postwar period (e.g. Rossellini, Pasolini, Marker, Wenders, and Antonioni). Here, India is seen in idealistic terms as a place where one can find democracy, peace, and equality among individuals, as opposed to violence.[5] Were the perspective these films put forth embraced, the rationale behind such selection might seem controversial. This is not the case, and in effect what I intend to do in the essay is precisely the opposite. Moving across a body of works that exercises a hegemonic power onto non-Western narratives and characters, I shall first echo the dismantling of a colonial attitude. Second, I argue that, while activating a rather despicable attitude towards the Asian/exotic female body, the gesture these films depict sheds light onto a basic misappropriation that ultimately reaffirms a universalistic ideal. To prove this, I will start by comparing two sequences from Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951) and Louis Malle's *L'Inde Fantôme* (*Phantom India*, 1969). The former is a kind of film within a film, a flashback that shows the

propitiatory dance performed by a young woman during her wedding, in which she turns into the goddess Radha before the god Krishna. The latter sequence illustrates the visit which the French director and his crew made to the Conservatory of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, where some girls were studying the Bharatanatyam dance. I am interested in these two sequences because, on the one hand, through the display of dancing bodies they establish an apparent suspension of conflict between cultures according to a perspective that brings the experience of travel close to the utopia of a shared language among peoples; on the other hand, these sequences engage with the audience through a play of confinements and breaks, misappropriations and secrets. This produces what Noland and Ness call 'migrations of gesture',[6] according to processes that sweep away all claims to authenticity.

I will then refer to a third sequence from Fritz Lang's *Der Tiger von Eschnapur* (*The Tiger of Eschnapur*, 1959) in order to solve the contradictions outlined throughout this essay. In this sequence, the co-protagonist Seetha performs a dance in honour of the fertility of a goddess, in the shade of a huge statue of the deity. This last case study will allow to extend the reflection to the ambiguity not just of filmed gestures, but of filmic gestures.[7] I will endeavour to demonstrate that in the mediation between these dancing bodies the 'dancing' camera and the surrounding environment, elements of gratuitousness, and gift-giving interweave with others related to risk and danger through an enigmatic intensification of the relation between the film and the viewer. In this view, while these case studies will inevitably raise questions that feature prominently in the debate on Orientalism and gender, juxtaposing the three films will also allow me to link the dance sequence back to early cinema and its alleged universal quality of images on the basis of its expressive and pre-verbal potential. Finally, by drawing upon Lyotard and Focillon, I will attempt to trace what remains of the filmic gesture back to an idea of 'purity' associated to the 'potentiality' of the cinematic image which transcends borders and cultures.

There has been (at least) another moment in the history of cinema in which universalist aspirations and representations of cultural gestures were closely interlinked: the first years of silent cinema. As Miriam Hansen recalls, 'the myth of a visual language overcoming divisions of nationality, culture, and class, already a *topos* in the discourse on photography, accompanied the cinema from the Lumieres' first screening through the 1920's'.[8] The search for a universal language suggests that mutual encounters and genuine recip-

rocal understanding were becoming increasingly difficult. Indeed, at the beginning of the century, colonial policies were still rapidly expanding,[9] while the tensions that were destined to lead to the First World War and totalitarianism were intensifying. In 1905, Georg Simmel noted the double function of secrecy and misappropriation in the configuration of every social gathering:

> Interaction among people normally rests on certain elements being common to their conceptual worlds, on objectively mental contents forming the material that is developed through its relationships to subjective life; the model and the essential vehicle for that, equally for all, is language. If one looks a bit closer, though, the basis hereby intended consists in no way only in what one and the other know or, as the case may be, what one knows as the mental content of the other, but it is interwoven with what one knows, but the other does not. […] concord, harmony, cooperation, which count as the plainly socializing strengths, must be penetrated by distance, competition, repulsion, in order to produce the real configuration of society.[10]

According to Simmel, even people sharing a common language – be it 'artificial' or 'natural' – are subject to distinctions in terms of knowledge that, while excluding subjects or establishing a hierarchy between them, also promote and reconfigure social balances. Simmel draws on the example of secret or tribal societies, in which only those who are familiar with certain behaviours and who conform to specific postures can access the sphere of knowledge. Egalitarianism and universalism ultimately prove detrimental, in his view:

> We are simply so equipped that we not only, as mentioned above, need a certain proportion of truth and error as a basis of our love, but also of clarity and ambiguity in the pattern of our life's elements. What we see clearly short of the latter foundation thus shows us just the limit of its attraction and prohibits the fantasy from weaving into it its possibilities […] a part of the person closest to us must be offered to us in the form of *ambiguity* and *opacity* for their attraction to remain elevated for us; thereby the majority of people make up for the attractiveness that the minority possesses with the inexhaustibility of their inner life and growth.[11]

This last sentence applies well to the film-going experience in the silent movie era. This too is an exclusive social ritual (accessible only under certain conditions), based on lies (fiction), and capable of blandishing its followers through encyclopaedic knowledge and primal sensory experiences. On the big screen, 'ambiguity' and 'opacity' (e.g. as regards the outcome of a plot) increase the attraction felt for a minority (film characters). In other words, silent cinema outstrips any artificial language.[12] Indeed, cinema sets itself

the task of coupling a widespread thirst for knowledge with an implicit veil of secrecy, a rhetorical universalism with a particularism based on evidences, a promise of clarity with a penchant for the mysterious. For example, one can consider the *Danse serpentine* developed by Loïe Fuller in the late nineteenth century and reproduced in dozens of early film adaptations. This popular reinterpretation does not only combine the unveiling of knowledge with the concealment of the nude body, but also allows for a simultaneous fascination with the exotic (the other) and the burlesque tradition (the self) to emerge; the centrality of the dancer and the marginality of the viewing subject; and the display of movement and the mystery of its meaning.[13] This *hermeneutic porosity (also) exists* through silence, *in which the protagonists of the films are caught. This is the key point of my argument. As Michel Marie recalled when discussing Benjamin Fondane's writings, the silence of these characters 'forces [...] the viewer to assign them other words, other motivations'. At the same time, it forces directors and actors to create 'a new and perfect gestural language, which man had already abandoned during prehistory, and which does not merely replace words, but reveals their failure and highlights their emptiness'.*[14] In other words, enticing the audience does not depend only on the lack of words, but also – and especially – on the gestures seeking to replace words.[15] These gestures ensure the eruption of all acts of signification, connecting them to forms of pre-verbal communication. For example, Béla Balázs argued:

> The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. [...] Man will become visible once again. [...] The language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind. [...] Have we not often observed that primitive peoples have a stock of gestures that is richer than that of a highly educated European with a vast vocabulary at his disposal? Once a few years have passed in which the art of film has flourished, our academics will perhaps realize that we should turn to the cinema so as to compile a lexicon of gestures and facial expressions on a par with our dictionaries of words. But the audience will not wait for this new grammar to be put together by academies of the future; they will go to the cinema and learn it themselves.[16]

As Blümlinger and Lavin have recently suggested, already in early cinema, gesture had presented itself 'as a place of passage, as an interface between one subject and the other (which might take a plural form), and between one subject and certain techniques'.[17] This occurs in an even more compelling way when – as in the age of silent cinema – what are shown are exotic settings, rituals, and traditions from faraway lands and territories that are captured because of and as the epitome of 'otherness'. Here, the unfamiliar nature of

the images and the impossibility of reducing them to any utilitarian and ob-jectifying knowledge are replaced not only by the gesture in itself, but also by the *dispositif* in itself, both in all their nudity. Agamben's views here spring to mind, as he states that

> the gesture is communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as *pure* mediality.[18]

While there is 'nudity' or, to better say, 'purity', this must be identified not as an act of assertion, but rather as one of subtraction, as the removal rather than the addition of something. Hence, the 'nothing-to-say' works as a progressive unveiling of meaning. The dance sequences I look at also show similar processes of 'denudation' or 'unveiling'. The question they raise is then whether the presence of synchronous sound and of a more explicit pur-suit of universalism and mutual understanding changes the balances at play or not.

Harriet is the fourteen-year-old daughter of a British family living on the shores of the Ganges, in Bengal. She spends her days with two girls her age: Valérie, whose father owns a jute factory, and Melanie, the daughter of an Irishman and an Indian woman. The three girls are in love with Captain John, an American soldier who has lost a leg during the war and is now a guest of Melanie's father. To impress the young soldier, Harriet first writes and then reads him a tale set in a timeless India. It is at this point – roughly halfway through Jean Renoir's *The River* – that a short film within the film begins: the tale of a young farm girl who falls in love with an older man and plunges into desperation when she finds out that her father wants to marry her off to an-other, unknown man. Luckily, on the wedding day the girl discovers that her husband-to-be is none other than the man she loves. Moved by the happiness of this encounter, she performs a propitiatory dance in which she turns into the goddess Radha, while her groom turns into the god Krishna. Enveloped in a white, largely undecorated dress at the centre of a bare courtyard, for a few minutes Radha captures the gaze of the man she loves and of the musi-cians by executing elegant, accurate, sensuous, and athletic movements. These constitute a sort of benevolent epiphany for the new couple, but also for Harriet, who has finally earned Captain John's attention.

Fig. 1: Stills from Renoir's The River.

I recognise the same movements in Louis Malle's *L'Inde Fantôme*, a documentary film produced almost twenty years later. As is widely known, in 1968, just before the May events in France, Malle spent a few months in India together with a crew consisting of only a sound technician and a cameraman. Like many other Europeans – including many directors – Malle believed that the land of Gandhi and Nehru could regenerate his outlook on the world. However, the reality he encountered on his journey from the north to the south of the country failed to meet his initial expectations. In the seven episodes of what was to become a television series, he struggles to come to terms with poverty, conflicts, and social and ethnic contradictions. Mysticism, contemplation, harmony, and concord hardly play any part in the documentary, although they do in a sequence featured in the second episode, *Choses vues à Madras*. At Adyar the French director visits the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, where they teach Bharatanatyam, a 'traditional' Indian

dance. There are several female pupils residing at the local school, but the camera first focuses on two foreign girls – one Japanese, the other American – who are trying to learn the dance moves, with considerable effort and never synchronised. The director's gaze is then caught by two dancers in an adjacent room, both of whom are Indian, although they come from different regions. These two girls display a remarkable harmony and precision in executing the dance steps, moves, and postures. In the interview that follows, they show great composure. For Malle, just as for Harriet, this break with the contradictions of reality is an engrossing epiphany.

Fig. 2: Stills from Malle's Phantom India.

While differing in terms of their directing style, settings, and narrative registers, the two sequences I have briefly described[19] share several common features. First of all, they present the same dance, Bharatanatyam. Significantly, the farm girl who turns into the goddess Radha is played by Radha

Sri Sham, the daughter of the then president of the Theosophical Society which Malle was to visit two years later – a pupil of Rukmini Devi Neelakanda Sastri, the choreographer who reintroduced Bharatanatyam into India.[20] Both performances take place in settings that lack culturally defined scenographic elements: the nondescript courtyard of a farmhouse, and an unfurnished school room. Despite the poverty of the settings, the two sequences engender a suspension of the narrative flow, sublimating the tension of the story (the death of one of Harriet's two brothers in *The River*; Malle's encounter with a poor and desperate India), turning it into an ecstatic performance that acquires a synecdoche function expressing an ideal of peace and serenity among peoples. Radha's spectacle marks the climax of Harriet's tale, which combines the model of pure, romantic teenage love with that of love for a fascinating foreign country. It is a tale where a potential misappropriation – between a bride and groom who do not know or love each other – turns into profound, spiritual indulgence. As for the girls from the dance school in *L'Inde Fantôme*, allow me to quote Malle's voiceover:

> This grace, this beauty, this perfect harmony of body and mind is like the idealized vision of India, one that I'd so rarely encountered that I questioned if it really existed. Mystical India, that transcends appearances to achieve unity […] This is India: A worldview we don't understand, a social hierarchy that puzzles us, an economic reality that shocks us, but also the hesitant, fragile grace of two girls conversing with God.

This general lack of conflict is therefore replaced by the desire for an affective, sensual, or spiritual union with the other. As this desire is never fulfilled, it creates a series of unbalances, but it still binds together these strange gatherings. As was already the case in early cinema,[21] in the two performances the flow of events is suspended, along with the need for words and relational tensions. What gains ground, by contrast, is the moving body, which is entrusted by activating intersubjective mechanisms designed to bridge linguistic distances, or – to quote Malle's worlds from the film – 'appearances to achieve unity'. Here one is reminded of Béla Balázs's quote: '*Man* will become visible once again', in virtue of the fact that 'the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of *man*kind'. It is worth noting that, in Balazs' words, mankind is conceived as a universal category. However, as I have already pointed out, in Renoir's and Malle's films the category of mankind is replaced by the figure of the (young) woman, and specifically of her gesturing body. The agency operating this replacement, instead, corresponds in both cases to the (male) authors. Clearly here the fact that such a depiction

is produced by white men who insistently focus their gaze on Asian women would cause a short circuit in terms of gender balance and racial parity. Unsurprisingly, the 'visible woman' is used as a medium herself, as a link between the physical and the spiritual worlds, between a process of embodiment and its sublimation into an immaterial and ideal condition. The farm girl takes the appearance of Radha, the female dancers of the Conservatory, that of the 'true' India. Gestures seem to replace words, or even transfigure them.

Consequently, a fourth feature shared by the two sequences leads us to consider a question of interest for gender and postcolonial studies. One should not forget that in both sequences there are young women dancing to please male gazes: in one case, Radha dances before her husband-to-be and the musicians; in the other, the Conservatory girls dance before other musicians (including another girl). Hence, there is not only harmony and peace, but also charm and seduction, desire and power. What is more, there are other male gazes, this time of European origin, operating offscreen: that of Captain John, the 'implicit' intradiegetic spectator of Radha's dance; and those of Malle's crew, whose camera voluptuously moves around the female bodies.

If the 'white' identity of the Western male gazes is openly declared so is the mixed identity of the dancers: Radha Sri Sham does not merely interpret goddess Radha in Harriet's flashback, but also stars in the role of Melanie, significantly, a girl of mixed ancestry who will win Captain John's heart. As for the rooms of the Theosophical Society, they are frequented by a 'mix' of girls of different origins and ethnicities: Indian, American, and Japanese. In other words, these female dancers with mixed identities embody a foreign culture at the mercy of Western male observers who are in a way hidden, marginal, and at the same time protected by other, 'native' male gazes. At the same time, however, they are in a way foreign, per se, in the context where they appear and operate, because in effect they are used as clichés of an imagined exoticism, but an incorrect one. They are in fact far from embodying the native, traditional, Indian culture, which would not appear native nor traditional to anybody actually belonging to the culture they were supposed to represent.

It cannot be denied, then, that a power dynamic is at work here. Despite the epiphanies provided by the two dances, there is still a dominant male gaze controlling and manipulating a dominated subject – significantly, a fe-

male one of 'Oriental' origin. From this perspective, many of the critical categories put forward in foundational gender studies and postcolonial texts stand out. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said too focuses on a dancer, the Egyptian Kuchuk Hanem, whom Gustave Flaubert fell in love with and described in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) and *Hérodias* (1877).[22] In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey deals with films featuring musical acts, dance performances, or stripteases, because 'woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle'.[23] Within this interpretive framework, I would like to add that this imbalance I have just highlighted also affects – albeit in far from obvious ways – the rhetoric of a visual and democratic Esperanto proposed by the two sequences I have been discussing. Additionally, it allows me to trace an ideal unbroken line back to early cinema.

It seems to me that these performances too confirm Simmel's argument that the ambiguity and opacity of discourses – which, I would add, distinguishes every form of essentialism (as defined in postcolonial studies) – increases the attractiveness of a gesturality, which is apparently universal yet deeply unequal. This is the case, for instance, when the articulation of the relations between the setting and the characters traces a series of invisible cultural borders that cannot be crossed: if John, Harriet, or Malle were to step into the frame, for instance to engage with the other, both the flashback in *The River* and the training in *L'Inde Fantôme* would immediately cease to exist. It is as though the privilege of the viewing pleasure which modern/Western man derives from the sight of a primitive/exotic woman necessarily required him to forego haptic pleasure.[24] Simmel would argue that this is an exclusion akin to the one characterising secret societies, where it rouses a desire for knowledge, but also for conquest and dominance.

Building further upon Simmel's contribution, I wish to note that also in this case the desire for knowledge (and dominance) is based on a range of misappropriations and lies that inevitably end up altering the rhetoric of egalitarian aspirations. Let us think of the Bharatanatyam dance, which in both films is presented as a practice associated with the most traditional and authentic India. In fact, it is something quite different. Certainly, it is modelled after *Dasi Attam*, a Dravidian dance from southern India which is executed by *Devadasis*, adolescent priestesses who since the tenth century have consecrated themselves to the worship of the gods and the sexual gratification of the priests, as God's slaves. However, it is worth considering that the dance in the film is a far more recent version of *Dasi Attam*, stripped of all

sexual references. Gaston, among others, notes that the Bharatanatyam represents a recent revival, as it was developed in the mid-1940s by Rukmini Devi, an Indian choreographer with a cosmopolitan background who took part in the activities of the Theosophical Society from its foundation.[25] The latter was (and still is) an international New York-based organisation that is devoted to the promotion of Theosophy, esotericism, and the brotherhood of peoples; it is based on a kind of religious syncretism that transcends individual forms of worship and which is only accessible to the members of an elect community.[26] So while the gestures and movements may be reminiscent of the original ones performed by the *Devadasis*, the context in which the Bharatanatyam is performed changes the meaning of the dance gestures, *de facto* toning down its cultural and geographical specificity.

In Renoir's film the performance takes place in a region – Bengal – that is thousands of kilometres away from the birthplace of *Dasi Attam*, Tamil Nadu; in Malle's case, instead, the misappropriation springs from the fact that the director sees the Bharatanatyam as an ideal model for a mystical and unitary India, when in fact it represents a far more recent adaptation which is much less 'Indian' and 'transnational' than what is commonly assumed.[27] Consequently, such assumptions and depictions are basically signposting a misappropriation. In fact, the misappropriation that unfolds before our eyes seems to establish more than just a particular relationship between the female dancers, the intradiegetic spectators, the camera, and the audience. They contribute to redefine the functions and boundaries of space through what Noland and Ness call *migrations of gestures*, i.e. gradual shifts of meaning in expressive gestures, which are particularly frequent in performances:

> In a rich variety of ways, [the] gestures *migrate* (as well as disappear) and […] in migrating they create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences. In a world of inescapable global circulation, gestures, too, undergo appropriations and enjoy afterlives that change their initial function.[28]

The two scholars tend to assign a positive meaning to the changes that gestures undergo by migrating, because 'gesturing may very well remain a resource for resistance to homogenization, a way to place pressure on the routines demanded by technical and technological standardization'.[29] Here, however, I would like to focus on the contradictory aspects of the *resemanticisation* processes underway. I have already noted how the female dancers have a 'mixed' identity, if not one that is wholly foreign to the culture they

are expected to embody. It is easy to see, then, that in the interplay of pro-
tected gazes and manifest desires, of marked borders and yearnings to breach
them, the only subjects who are really excluded and, indeed, entirely absent
from the representation are the Indians – or, rather, the voices and bodies of
a supposed 'true India' that does not simply migrate but is pushed offscreen.

Seetha is a young dancer. She stands at the centre of a love triangle:
Chadra, the maharajah of the principality of Eschnapur, wants to marry her,
but Harald – a German architect hired to build a large mausoleum – also falls
in love with her after saving her from a tiger. Halfway through the film, after
she confesses to Harald that she was abandoned in India by an Irish sailor
when she was still a baby, the woman is led into the Temple of the Goddess,
a half-empty recess cut into the rock, at the centre of which stands a huge
statue with marked feminine features. Wearing nothing but gold necklaces
and jewels, a seductive Seetha appears before the eyes of the sovereign (and
of the viewers), dancing on the notes of an Oriental-sounding melody. Her
sensuous movements are a tribute to the goddess, but they are also – and
especially – performed to excite the male spectators: Prince Chandra, his
brother Ramigani, and the elderly priests. The dancer performs alone, before
the great female idol, mixing – or rather, alluding to – dance styles of differ-
ent origins. Everything seems to be going smoothly until Seetha stops danc-
ing after she notices, hidden behind an outcrop, the German architect – an-
other *voyeur* of her performance. The young woman's fear and uncertainty is
due to the fact that Westerners are strictly banned from accessing the Temple:
unlike the other male spectators, if caught, Harald risks being killed.

Der Tiger von Eschnapur is arguably Fritz Lang's most glaringly Orientalist
film, along with the second episode in his so-called *Indian Epic, Das indische
Grabmal*.[30] Everything we see is explicitly fake. The story is set in an imag-
inary India; the actors are mostly Europeans' often wearing make-up and
greasepaint to seem more 'Indian'; most of the sequences were produced in
German studios – only a few outdoor scenes were shot in Rajasthan. The
Principality of Eschnapur is not a democracy founded on non-violence, but
a cruel tyranny torn by inner strife, a dangerous and even deadly place, es-
pecially for the few, unfortunate Europeans who are summoned to court. Es-
sentialism, the use of stereotypes, and discriminatory gender portrayals are
rife. Lang's film is open to all forms of postcolonial criticism. Yet, in the dance
sequence I have described, some of the features already encountered in the
two previous travel films stand out:

- bare and culturally undefined settings;
- a female body dancing for the pleasure of the male gaze;
- the mixed identity of the female dancer (who is of Irish origin, yet perceived to be Indian);
- the lack of conflicts…
- …which could be triggered by the appearance of Harald, another European *voyeur* who gazes at the performance without being seen
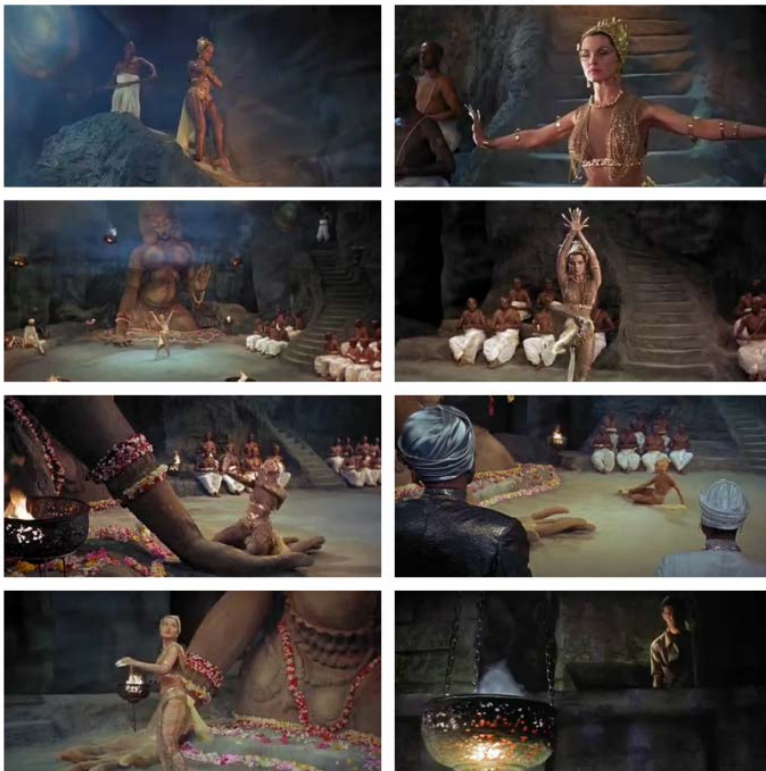

Fig. 3: Stills from Lang's The Tiger of Eschnapur.

The presence of the same features in a film that is worlds apart from the ones previously discussed allows me to leave aside, for the time being, the obvious reductionist dynamics at work in order to take the investigation further and reflect in greater detail on the function of gestures as a medium. It is not simply a matter of conceiving gesture – as Agamben does – as the 'display of a mediality, [as] the making visible of *a medium as such'*. [31] By contrast, it is a matter of trying to find its potential for inclusiveness and conciliation.

However, I contend it is an unlikely inclusiveness. What I wish to argue here is that, in the cases I have selected, the exotic and foreign context favours a condition in which the arguments illustrating the meaning of a movement no longer apply (or are worth 'nothing'). The movement in question proves to be essentialist by nature, Orientalist by necessity, and stereotypical by agreement, combining within itself a tension towards syncretism, synthesis, and translation. Certainly, to translate is also to transport from one side to another. Yet, alongside this migratory condition, there is also the visceral condition related to failing to land, drowning, becoming 'nothing'. Note, however, that this possibility is not the final outcome of the cinematographic gesture, but rather its initial precondition. The right words are suggested once more by Lyotard, who uses the concept of *différend*. By this he means:

> the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible.[32]

Certainly, in this case the French philosopher is speaking of what is un-representable and unsayable (for example, the Holocaust), but he is also fore-seeing the more general possibility that 'removing' might signify more than 'adding'. In our case, for example, 'the unstable state and instant of *gesture* wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be' appears to distinguish the way in which the encounters between Harriet and the John, Malle and the dancing girls, Seetha and Harald take place. Appar-ently, these dances do not produce meanings, a 'nothing' which undermines the need for clarity in communication because it presents itself in a potential form which is both gratuitous (i.e. with no predefined outcomes) and men-acing (because its possible outcome is annihilation). In the three films, the fleeting, opaque, and ambiguous nature of the movements reveals the field of unexpressed possibilities. The former are not merely the outcome of a re-lationship between those who dominate and those who are dominated as a postcolonial and a gendered reading would suggest: they are also the display of an 'annihilation', of a removal (of meaning) during the *mise-en-scène* of the performance. Filmic and filmed gestures highlight a progressive toning down of the identity with which the dance as a gesture of the body is associ-ated.

I realise that focusing so emphatically on the as yet unexpressed potenti-ality of a gesture might prove confusing for the reader, but it enables the re-

definition of the relationship between the subjects and sensible reality, starting from the force fields that are activated. Take what Henri Focillon states with regard to hand movements:

> Observe your hands living freely without thinking of their function or the burden of their mystery: resting, fingers, gently bent, as if they were lost in dream, or even in the elegant liveliness of *pure* gestures, of pointless gestures. They appear to be loosely drawing in the air the multitude of possibilities, and by playing with themselves, they are preparing for the next useful intervention.[33]

This 'useful intervention' – continues the French art historian – occurs when man, especially ancient man, 'breathes the world through his hands', becoming acquainted with it:

> The possession of the world demands a sort of tactile faculty. Sight slides along the length of the universe. The hand knows that objects are weighted. […] The hand's actions define this hollow in the air and all the things that occupy it. Surface, volume, density, and weight are not optical phenomena. It is between the fingers and in the hollow of the palms that man first experiences things. Not by sight is space measured but by man's hand and his steps. The act of touching fills nature with mysterious forces. Without it, it would remain the same as the landscapes of a dark room: superficial, flat, and chimerical.[34]

In the cases examined so far, the possibility of breathing the world through dance occurs through a process of rarefaction/subtraction of gestures which traces the force fields that have been activated back to the presence of the film camera. The latter imperils not just movement (the filmed gesture), but also the movement filming the movement (the filmic gesture). As envisaged by Focillon, without tactile perception; without being able to touch surface, volume, density, and weight; without being able to measure space with one's hand and steps; and without knowing things by tactile contact, the European viewer who transfers the danger and pleasure of encounters over to his or her intradiegetic double – directors and characters – remains caught within 'the pleasant landscapes of the magic lantern, slight, flat, and chimerical'.

The dead end that lies ahead finally draws back to this essay's starting point. At the beginning of this essay I had raised the question of whether a gesture performed in a space that is 'other' can fill the communicative gap between distant and different subjects. Having reached the end of my enquiry, I can only give a negative answer. However, this is a 'promising' nega-

tive stage, in Lyotard's sense. Through the out-of-screen bodies of the European viewers and characters, the bodies dancing before the film camera rediscover a meaningful silence already described by early twentieth-cenury film theory. With Agamben, 'cinema's essential "silence" […] is, just like the silence of philosophy, exposure of the being-in-language of human beings: pure gesturality'.[35] However, in its postwar re-enactment, this silence also translates into 'an exposure of the being-in-language of human beings', as 'pure cinema' (in the sense of a film that has been purified, removed from meaning). In this sense, whereas misappropriation tones down all universalist aspirations, gesturality regains its character as a possibility and promise: to be a trace that leaves no trace, a gift for which nothing is expected in return, a display of technique – a phenomenological act – without technology – the logos, the sayability of that phenomenological act.

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Notes

[1] Cortright 2008.

[2] Jansen & Osterhammel 2013.

[3] Zuelow 2016, pp. 149-164.

[4] Ruoff 2006.

[5] Dalla Gassa 2016. See also Schenini 2017, pp. 546-586.

[6] Noland & Ness 2008.

[7] Blümlinger & Lavin 2018.

[8] Hansen 1991, p. 76.

[9] In 1914, 84% of the globe was controlled by European states through colonies, protectorates, possessions, dominions, and the Commonwealth. See Hoffman 2015, p. 2.

[10] Simmel 2009, p. 313.

[11] Ibid., p. 324.

[12] Starting from different assumptions, Christian Metz has also devoted some pages to the incompatibility between the language of cinema and artificial languages such as Esperanto. See Metz 1974, pp. 63-64.

[13] On the importance of the *Danse serpentine* in this historical phase, see Gunning 2001. As regards the role played by dance in this period, I will refer to Brannigan 2011, pp. 19-38. On exoticism and Orientalism in relation to dance, see Bernstein & Studlar 1997.

[14] Fondane 1984, quoted in Marie 2005, pp. 14-15.

[15] On the crucial importance of the gestures performed before the film camera, see esp. Benjamin 1968 and Fondane 1984.

[16] Balázs 2010, pp. 10-12.

[17] Blüminger & Lavin 2018, p. 15.

[18] Agamben 2000, p. 59 (emphasis added).

[19] The two sequences may be viewed here: *The River*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho_5IMcL8og (accessed on 4 October 2019); *L'Inde fantôme* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UueMNMoFEl4 (accessed on 4 October 2019).

[20] Radha Sri Ram, a friend of the Renoirs, was the daughter of Nilakanta Sri Ram, who at the time was the fifth president of the Adyar Theosophical Society. She herself was to serve in the same capacity from 1980 to 2013, the year of her death. On her relationship with the French director and her involvement in the film, see Renoir 1974; Golsan 2011.

[21] Gunning 1984; Gaudreault & Gunning 1989.

[22] Said 1978.

[23] Mulvey 1975.

[24] Blumenberg 1979.

[25] On Rukmini Devi's rewriting of the Bharatanatyam, see esp. Gaston 1996 and Meduri 2008.

[26] On the ambiguous history of this international institution, see Lavoie 2012.

[27] O'Shea 2007.

[28] Noland 2008, p. X.

[29] Ibid.

[30] The sequence of Seetha's dance can be viewed online at the following address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cev78glZiKg (accessed on 4 October 2019). This sequence also ought to be set in relation with another, more explicitly sexual scene featured in the second episode of Lang's epic, *Das Indische Grabmal* (*The Indian Tomb*, 1959). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWKeSgv3oDw (accessed on 4 October 2019). On the genesis of the film, see Mennel 2009.

[31] Agamben 2000, p. 59.

[32] Lyotard 1988, p. 13.

[33] Focillon 1943, pp. 107-108 (emphasis added).

[34] Ibid., p. 110

[35] Agamben 2000, pp. 59-60.