

La critica sociologica

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è una rivista trimestrale fondata e diretta
da Franco Ferrarotti.
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[Foto di Franco Ferrarotti, 2008].

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Documentary Film and the ‘Body’ of Knowledge

Irina Leimbacher

ANTHROPOLOGIST Thomas Csordas recounts a story of a colleague who, in a discussion about the relevance of embodiment, asked how the concept could be used, for example, to explore the paintings of Joshua Reynolds. As the colleague began to verbally describe some of the paintings, he simultaneously, and without forethought, mimicked them with gestures – gestures that eloquently served to identify a culturally and historically specific manner of inhabiting space. While Reynolds’ paintings could be approached from any number of disciplinary perspectives, they also give us access to «a set of socially salient bodily dispositions of posture, bearing, and physique»¹ according to Csordas. The colleague was able to mimic and communicate this disposition gesturally, through his own body, at the same time as he struggled to find the words to describe it.

Csordas’ anecdote raises several questions. Is the colleague’s gesture a more efficient or lucid means of articulation when it comes to bodily dispositions? Is the act of mimicking a way of experiencing, a way of knowing? Are the two modes – gestural vs verbal – incommensurable, or capable of being translated one into the other? And what is the role of the seeing and visual media here, in the transmission of such corporeal knowledge?

If gestures, bodily dispositions, and other forms of incorporated knowledge are considered a crucial repository of culture, memory, or sense of identity, of what significance are they to the process of bringing those forms of experience and knowledge to light, of communicating them to others? While one can’t (yet?) imagine an entire doctoral thesis gesturally enacted, certainly the experiments of Victor Turner in the late 1970s and early 80s under the name of «performative anthropology» seem to have been a move in that direction. Claiming that one learns by experience through performative genres,² and with the aim of putting «experiential flesh on ... cognitive bones»,³ Turner argued for the value of physically and collaboratively performing one’s ethnographic research. With ethnography rendered as ‘a kind of instructional theatre’, the cognitive dominance of written discourse was challenged, and a different awareness achieved on the part of the researchers/performers. Whether this performance was useful not only for participants but for others as well – onlookers, fellow students – isn’t made clear.

Filmmakers and others working in visual media also periodically question the dominance of written discourse in academia and the social sciences. Filmmaker/ethnographer David MacDougall’s recent book, *The Corporeal Image*, is his second

¹ THOMAS CSORDAS, *Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology*, in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, eds. Gail Weiss, Honi Fern Haber, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 148.

² VICTOR TURNER, *The Anthropology of Performance*, New York, PAJ Publications, 1986, p. 100.

³ Ivi, p. 146.

volume¹ of impassioned arguments for the unique epistemological and anthropological value of audio-visual forms of representation. In large part, the book is his affirmative answer to his own central question: «is there such a thing as visual knowledge?»² MacDougall holds that visual media provide other ways of knowing than what is possible through verbal discourse – this knowing is perceptual and experiential as opposed to conceptual, based on acquaintance rather than description. For MacDougall, images are the stuff of thought as much as words are, and visual media are a means of putting the viewer into a particular *relation* to a subject, providing understanding through selection and progression (or juxtaposition) of images and scenes. Films also elicit bodily sensation in ways that text cannot, «stretch the boundaries of our consciousness», and «create affinities with bodies other than our own»³ according to him. In other words, it would seem that MacDougall sees visual media as a privileged vehicle for the dissemination of certain forms of corporeal knowledge.

My own interest in this brief article is not so much in visual knowledge *per se*, but in a particular kind of visualized corporeal knowledge and its implications. Is the Reynolds painting in Csordas' anecdote indicative of how cinematic representation might or does engage with corporeal knowledge – depicting and transmitting it as a non-discursive but embodied and embodyable form? And what sorts of affinities might or might not be created? It is noteworthy that Csordas had to point out the gestural mimicry his colleague was spontaneously engaging in, to bring it to his attention. The painting had depicted and imparted a form of knowledge that didn't recognize itself as such. Certainly one could say the same of much knowledge conveyed through film, both fiction and documentary.

In his seminal 1935 essay *Techniques of the Body*, Marcel Mauss recounts numerous anecdotes as a means of illustrating his general concept. In one, he was lying in a hospital bed in New York, when he was struck by something very particular and familiar about the nurses' gait and manner of moving through space. Subsequently he realized that his sense of familiarity was due to all the American movies he had seen, and the particular way women American women moved in them. And he claims that later he noticed that even the gait and posture of French women changed significantly to be more similar to their American counterparts – influenced, it seems, by the movie screens.⁴

Here I want to look at three non-fiction films in which the decision to incorporate, even display, forms of corporeal knowledge is central to their overall project, and, I would argue, to the viewer's visceral engagement with their subjects. These films have no pedagogical intent with regard to a specific knowledge or technique, but rather they integrate corporeal gesture as a means of engaging their subjects and their viewers on a somatic, rather than primarily intellectual, level. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (France, 1985), Chen Chie-Jen's *Factory* (Taiwan, 2002) and Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre's *Maquilapolis* (USA / Mexico, 2006) each include scenes in which

¹ DAVID MACDOUGALL, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Anthropology and the Senses*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, and the earlier *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

² IDEM, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Anthropology and the Senses*, cit., p. 240.

³ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴ MARCEL MAUSS, *Techniques of the Body*, in *Techniques, Technology and Civilization*, ed. Nathan Schlanger, New York, Berghahn Books, 2006, p. 80.



their subjects reenact or perform certain habitual gestures for the camera. All three employ these gestural performances in order to articulate, illuminate, and/or elicit forms of embodied knowledge. However, how such gestural reenactment is brought into play, and how it functions for the subjects, filmmakers and viewers, differs. It is my hope that a discussion of these examples might initiate reflection on how audio-visual media can serve as a reflection of and on such knowledge.

When it came out in 1985, Lanzmann's nine-hour *Shoah* revolutionized the possibilities of film's engagement with the Holocaust and with history and testimony in general. The breadth and intensity of his research, his refusal to use archival footage, and his unique interview strategies resulted in a work which has probably marked non-fiction filmmaking¹ more than any other. Among Lanzmann's many innovations was his deliberate placement of subjects in physical spaces or environments that encouraged them to engage with the past not only through the medium of words, but through bodily sensation. Thus several interview subjects were brought to the landscapes and villages of their past and/or asked to perform some of the habitual actions of their existence of that time. For example, the retired train conductor Henrik Gawkowski is filmed and interviewed in the very locomotive he operated in 1942 to transport trainloads of Jews to Treblinka.² And Lanzmann brings Simon Srebnic back to Chelmo where, as an adolescent of thirteen, he had been a prisoner. Lanzmann has him sing the German songs he was ordered to sing at the time, and films him in the village and fields where he was forced to burn Jews who had been gassed.

¹ In spite of the fact that Lanzmann refuses the 'documentary' label for *Shoah*.

² See CLAUDE LANZMANN, RUTH LARSON, DAVID RODOWICK, *Seminar With Claude Lanzmann 11 April 1990*, «Yale French Studies», n. 79 (1991), pp. 82-99, for further discussion, especially pp. 87-88 for the specific instructions that Lanzmann gave to Gawkowski concerning the scene.



Rather than try to globally summarize the effects of Lanzmann's interviews and reenactments, I will describe one of these: that which takes place with Abraham Bomba near the beginning of the second part of the film. It begins with about a minute of simply watching Bomba at work. There is no speech. We hear only muted background sounds of a barbershop while Bomba's name and the location of the interview, Israel, are identified by text on the screen. The movements of Bomba's body in the space of the barbershop (a space complicated by multiple mirrors) and of his hands trimming the hair of a male customer, are the focus of our attention. After almost a minute of observing him, we hear Lanzmann's voice: «Abraham, can you tell me, how did it happen? How were you chosen?»

As Bomba begins to speak, we learn that he was a Jewish barber and concentration camp prisoner who was forced to cut the hair of roomfuls of naked women on their way to the gas chamber in Treblinka. The entire interview – almost nineteen minutes long – is conducted while Bomba, with his comb and scissors in hand, continues to actively cut the hair, or at least make gestures of cutting the hair, of the unidentified man. Even when shot in close-up (and the size of the room results in the shots being either medium or close shots) we see enough to feel the movements of his body and hands, and the direction of his attention towards the head of his client. While his speech is tense and emphatic, clearly ill at ease with having to recount his memories of this period, his hands and body seem to be on auto-pilot. At a certain point Lanzmann asks for more details saying, «Can you imitate? How did you do?» and Bomba complies by using the man's hair as a prop to mimic the kind of fast, approximate cutting he would have done in the anteroom to the gas chamber. At about sixteen minutes, provoked by Lanzmann's questions about the specific memory of seeing women he knew from his home town, and having to cut their hair, Bomba breaks down and can no longer speak. Lanzmann somewhat apologetically urges him on, and he continues to roll the camera during the almost intolerable silence that follows. Bomba,



both as a means of refuge and distraction, moves and trims in silence as the camera shoots him mainly in close-up. After a minute or so, he visibly hardens himself and then continues to speak. A few more sentences are spoken, and the interview ends.

Bomba's gestures, both as a clearly familiar bodily act which requires almost no conscious attention, and also as a form of demonstration in response to some of Lanzmann's insistent questions, create an embodied visual counterpart to his oral testimony. But the performed gestures do much more than that. Each gesture towards the head, each snip of the scissors, each motion of Bomba's body and hands is an emanation of Bomba's embodied knowledge and memory, and an expression of his experience, both past and present, which simply has no verbal parallel. As the scene opens one has no idea that the physical context for the interview has been staged (and some viewers are never aware of this), nor that the focus of the testimony will be precisely about the act of cutting hair. One thus discovers, with a kind of growing shock, that the barbershop location and Bomba's gestures, are not fortuitous context or observational interlude. Instead, they are an integral part of the testimony, its very core, its bodily anchor. The viewer, or at least this viewer, begins to feel the echo of those gestures in her own body, both the effortless with which they are carried out and the tension which is clearly accompanying them, in their function as both a form of security and distraction. Our relation to Bomba is, in large part, experienced in response to these repetitive gestures that we feel in the very muscles of our arms and hands, and a certain apprehension with which his, and our, bodies becomes infused. I don't believe one can experience, or remember, this scene without some kind of bodily sensation, one that is not only a reaction to the horror of the story being told – or unable



to be told – but a response to Bomba’s own body-becoming-past-becoming-present in gesture and word, and our growing recognition of this.

MacDougall insists on the effects of images *of* bodies *on* the bodies of their viewers. He cites work by Merleau-Ponty and others concerning the ‘involuntary mimicry’ involved in looking at others’ bodies. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the ‘postural ‘impregnation’ of my own body by the conducts I witness»¹ is extended by MacDougall to potentially include what one witnesses on film. For MacDougall this involuntary engagement suggests a bodily connection that is «deeper [...] than empathy.»² How or why the connection does or does not happen in a specific film or for a specific viewer isn’t dealt with, although MacDougall occasionally suggests techniques or subject matter that might solicit such convergence.

Interestingly, in English the term empathy came into use as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, and it was associated with physical, and not merely mental, sensations. In fact, the 1909 Oxford English Dictionary citation is as follows: «Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride ... but I feel or act them in the mind’s muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*.»³ The term was also used to speak about aesthetic experiences, in the

¹ Cited in DAVID MACDOUGALL, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Anthropology and the Senses*, cit. p. 23.

² *Ibidem*.

³ ‘Empathy’ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50074152>.

sense of 'feeling oneself into' a work of art. For philosopher Theodor Lipps, whose work is associated with the early twentieth century uses of the term, we frequently respond with involuntary mimicry when observing human beings or works of art, and this motor response then creates an emotional response. Involuntary imitation of salient expressions or postures gives rise to feelings that correspond to them. As far as I know, there has been relatively little attention to this 'feeling oneself into' other people's bodies and other bodily dispositions in the realm of documentary film studies, although one would think that non-fiction film would be precisely the area where this would be of most interest to both practitioners and theorists.

Chen Chieh-Jen's *Factory*, which is presented either as a single-channel film or as a looped installation, takes place in an abandoned factory in Taipei with peeling paint and boxes and chairs piled up against the side walls. Inside this space appear several women, most in their fifties or older. First we are presented with two women, whom we continually return to in different poses, holding up a product of their labor, a drab blue cotton jacket with a shiny, dark blue lining. Then we see several women, sitting at evenly spaced tables, each with its own sewing machine. Over the course of the thirty-minute piece they are either slumped over their tables with exhaustion or actively sewing bits of cloth on their electric sewing machines. One woman becomes a central figure, and we repeatedly see her gently guiding the cloth under her sewing machine, painfully struggling to thread her needle, or wearily contemplating, with her head on the table, her cup of tea.

Intercut between these choreographed scenes are traveling shots of the floor of the factory in its current derelict state, and black-and-white archival images of Taiwanese factories during the industrial boom of the 1960s. The latter include newsreel shots of government figures inspecting, or proudly displaying, these sites of newly industrialized labor. This juxtaposition of the women performing the gestures of their labor and exhaustion in stylized scenes with the 'before' and 'after' shots of a factory at the peak and nadir of its glory suggests a narrative of global capital, its acquisition and abandonment of factories and workers in its mobile quest for ever-greater profit.

There is no speech, or any other sound for that matter, in this silent film. The sewing machines and the women, while at work or at rest, are mute. Instead of words, it is their acts, postures and gestures that eloquently speak. It is the knowledge and experience of these women's bodies – which has, perhaps, no present use or desire for words – that are channeled through the elegant choreography of the filmmaker. According to the latter, though this is not made explicit in the film, the women, all workers who had worked for years in this very factory, did not want to speak. When they trespassed, together with the filmmaker, into the space of their past livelihood to make the film, he simply asked them to 'work'. According to Chen, it is from their spontaneous gestures that the rest of the film was developed.¹ The placement of certain objects, including a visible bullhorn in the travelling shots of the factory, might remind a certain Taiwanese audience of the demonstrations that apparently followed the closing of this and many other factories in the late 1990s.

¹ From a description of the film sent by the filmmaker.



In an earlier article, «Films of Memory,»¹ MacDougall compares the ways in which the mind and the medium of film can represent experience. Citing the work of Jerome Bruner, MacDougall categorizes thought as tending to be either iconic, symbolic, or enactive. The enactive is the kinesthetic dimension of thought – experience as it is recalled in the muscles, and which tends to be most closely associated with the emotions. MacDougall suggests that film's ways of conveying experience are similar to those of the mind: through images, as in iconic thought; through words (spoken or written) as in symbolic thought; or through gesture as in enactive thought. Film produces its representation of the enactive, its gestural thought, in two ways: through images of physical behavior, especially of a habitual kind, and also through the work of editing when it enacts certain associations or juxtapositions. I would argue that certain dynamic forms of cinematography and camera movement also constitute and provoke qualities of enactive thought.

This idea is not new. Many filmmakers – among the most obvious Eisenstein, Vertov, Kalatozov and others working in the Soviet film industry of the 1920s and early 30s – have verbally and visually theorized the gestural use of film cuts and images and their bodily impact on viewers. Yet the most banal form of film's potentially enactive 'thought,' the use of images of habitual behavior, is probably the least explored. The filmmakers whose works I'm discussing here each asked their subjects to reenact cer-

¹ Originally published in *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (1) (spring 1992), pp 29-37 and re-published in *Transcultural Cinema*, cit., pp. 231-244.



tain habitual actions, and in each case the reenactment is more or less rehearsed. Lanzmann has clearly left the specifics of the 'performances' up to the spontaneous dynamics of the interpersonal encounters. He uses habitual behaviors and familiar spaces as a stage and prompt for memory, but also to situate words in gestures and bodies that engage *us* viscerally and on a muscular level. Chen, on the other hand, has developed a collaborative choreography that articulates a collective corporeal knowledge. In both cases the gestures of habitual actions become embodied *testimony*, a testimony all the more powerful because of its kinesthetic force as film's enactive thought.

Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre's *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* is an hour-long film made with a group of women employed or formerly employed by some of the eight hundred maquiladoras that line the *us* Mexican border in Tijuana.¹ The film combines a number of elements: first-person diary footage shot on consumer video by the film's main subjects, observational footage, interviews, and choreographed scenes reenacting gestures of factory labor and metaphorically staging the women's status as objects within the system of global capital. As in Chen's *Factory*, the choreography and performance of these gestures is collaborative and filmed with great attention to detail. In *Maquilapolis*, however, the *mise-en-scène* is deliberately *not* realistic, and the choreography functions less as an articulation of collective embodied

¹ The film was made in collaboration with the women of Grupo Factor x, Colectivo Chilpancingo, and Promotoras por los Derechos de las Mujeres.

knowledge and more as a commentary on that knowledge and its socio-economic context and constraints.

The stage for the collective reenactment is an empty lot in an area of Tijuana where factories are built and abandoned in a sporadic, ever faster, cycle. This site of past and future factories is where the women came to work from various parts of Mexico, as one of their voices tells us. The choreographed scene is elaborated through the film, first appearing in the opening credit sequence, once briefly in the middle, and again at the conclusion of the film. The women form a group, a kind of chorus, a collective but also de-individualized subject at the film's opening. Together they perform, in unison, the gestures of factory labor, the deliberately reenacted, repetitive, gestures of their economic livelihood. Their hands push, pull, turn, remove, install, package ... air. The commodities produced by their labor are absent as we watch this abstract demonstration of their knowledge, their typically invisible gestures of labor now filling the ironically empty lot. In this opening scene, there is a deliberate refusal to frame any of the women as individuals, and we see them as gestures of saleable labor.

At various moments punctuating the film, other staged sequences function as visual metaphors for the women's self-described sense of their own commodification, of their status as 'objects of labor'. One sequence displays a television on a rotating display table that is visually deconstructed:¹ first we see the product, then via superimposition we see its main components inside, each one disappearing piece by piece. The last component we see is then displayed again, in the hands of Carmen Duran (one of the main figures in the film). Now it is she on the rotating display, with the piece in her hand, as we hear her words: «I assemble flybacks». In a later sequence we see several of the women on these rotating displays, beautifully lit and made up, with bright colored textiles behind them. As they turn towards us they state the name of one of the corporations they've worked for: Panasonic, Sanyo, Nellcor, Tocabi, Industrias Fronterizas, IFSA – the list goes on as the corporate names fill up the screen.

In *Maquilapolis* the various scenes of demonstrations of work, of the practiced and repetitive gestures of labor, are presented as a form of display, similar to the choreographed display of the women themselves and their products described above. They and the gestures of their labor are what remains invisible in the final commodity that finds its way to the international marketplace and into our homes. We see a woman's hands demonstrating the assembly of a piece of electronic equipment and a sequence of several close-ups of hands, demonstrating the specific movements of their work, followed by women displaying 'their' products in front of them: a television component, a pair of stockings, a plastic notebook. All of these scenes are beautifully shot on film, professionally lit, and self-consciously stylized. Intercut with the observational and diary footage that makes up more than three quarters of the film, they stand out aesthetically and seem to function as an ironic commentary on, and response to, global capitalism's erasure and disregard of these women.

¹ Though done in a very different style, the scene is reminiscent of the analysis of commodities in Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye* in which he demonstrates the role of labor by deconstructing the production of meat and of bread in reverse motion sequences.



At the conclusion of the film, we return to the same site as in the opening, but with a different perspective. Over the course of the documentary, several women have become complex characters for us – through interviews, diary footage that they narrate, and observational scenes of their activism. We have seen their homes made of recycled North American garage doors, gotten acquainted with their children, been introduced to the chemical pollutants trickling through their alleys. The final sequence no longer references their bodily labor, but rather focuses on their faces, each framed in close-up, as we hear Carmen speak about her plans for her future. Finally they disperse, each taking her own path away from the group, and the filmmakers/camera metaphorically take their leave, via a wide helicopter shot that reiterates the imbrication of the women's labor and lives with the political geography of the us-Mexico border.

As in the two films discussed earlier, the gestural performances also serve as a kind of bodily testimony in *Maquilapolos*, though of a different sort. The way in which these sequences are filmed and positioned against the naturalistic observational and diary scenes renders them, yes, an evocation of bodily knowledge, but even more a self-conscious and quasi Brechtian commentary on it. The performances are therefore less a testimony of a certain kind of experience and knowledge than a testimony about how the women have come, over time, to see it. In their repeated gestures and their display, they perform their critical consciousness of their role in the system of global labor. At the same time, because so much of the rest of the film is extremely verbal, these scenes do, also, solicit a somatic engagement on our part and function as the film's enactive gesture to its audience.

«[T]o recount is not sufficient. They must play it» said Claude Lanzmann of his interview subjects in *Shoah*.¹ In a sense this 'playing', enacting or reenacting, functions as a means of engaging the non-discursive knowledge and remembering of the body, first of the witness/actor, then, by a kind of empathic² bodily extension, of the viewer. It is a way of bringing the 'bodies' back into our conception of knowledge and of engaging what MacDougall, following Bruner, has called film's and the viewers' enactive thought. Such forms of knowledge, both lived and evoked through enactive, visual and other means, deserve much more attention. I hope that this brief discussion of Lanzmann's, Chen's, and Funari and de la Torre's work with the bodily gesture and incorporated knowledge of their cinematic subjects may be a step in this direction.

¹ CLAUDE LANZMANN, *Le Lieu et la parole*, in *Au sujet de Shoah: Le Film de Claude Lanzmann*, ed. Michel Deguy, Paris, 1990, p. 301, cited in DOMINICK LE CAPRA, Lanzmann's *Shoah: Here There Is No Why*, *Critical Inquiry*, 23: 2 (Winter, 1997), p. 261.

² In the sense of empathy as discussed above.

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