I. The Status of the Image in Modernity And Beyond

In 1934, Walter Benjamin described modernity as an "image sphere,"¹ and certainly this designation is no less apt today than it was then. If some contemporary scholarship has diagnosed a "fetishization" of the image as complicit with a disavowal of real bodies implicit in the cultural logic of modernity — and of late capitalism — Benjamin's theses on mechanical reproducibility remind us of the inescapable imbrication of image and body, *techne* and *physis.²* Seeing, as Nietzsche remarks, is always "seeing something" and the eye, human or technological, is pregnant with "active and interpreting forces," producing the objects of its gaze as much as registering them.³ To consider the status of the image in modernity assumes that, on one hand, the idea of an image is not so definite as to be a- or trans-historical
and that, on the other, such a broad and apparently vague concept as that
of the image — which may refer to a visual, literary or philosophical "object"
and to something so seemingly amorphous as a "mental picture" — is
accessible to historical analysis. No doubt, any assertion about the status of
the image in modernity runs against the grain of both poles of definition, the
one that would make the concept of the image independent of its particular
context and the one that would define it as absolutely dependent on the
particularity of its context.

My object in staking out this
middle ground between the image
in general and the image in par-
ticular is to examine the manner in
which the human body, and human
gesture, are pictured and experi-
enced by and through cinema. In
order to read gesture, as an always
historical conditioning of the body
in its relationship to the world
around it, we need to ask with what kind of eye gesture is envisioned
and, as seeing itself is a gesture,
with what kind of gestures the eye
engages in seeing, that is, to ex-
amine the exchanges between the
mediation and representation of
gesture, and gestures of mediation
and representation. Art in the age
of mechanical reproduction pre-
pares for itself bodies, collective
and individual, whose configura-
tions both determine and represent
a cultural and corporeal logic proper
to its own historical moments. The
rather large question I want to pose in the space of this brief essay is then:
how does cinema both reflect and constitute cultural conceptions of the
human body? Essential to the manner in which I pose this question is my
contention that what a medium is and what it does is not limited to its
particular material effects or, in other words, is not fully determined by its
technological specificity. Gertrude Stein’s assertion that both her epoch and
her literary method need to be characterized as "cinematic" ("I was doing," she
writes, "what the cinema was doing") draws our attention to the
circulation between the various arts and sciences of effects linked to,
although not necessarily generated by, film. And Stein’s diagnosis of
contagious medial-effects is equally pertinent to our own era — even if we
might not now describe them precisely as "cinematic." I’d like here to expand on Giorgio Agamben’s assertion that by the twentieth-century “the mythical fixity of the image has been broken, and we should not really speak of images here, but of gestures.”

II. The Decomposition of the Image and the Loss of Gesture

The possibility of cinema’s moving image is predicated on the di-vision of a movement into its constituent parts, the (now-standardized) twenty-four frames per second which the persistence of vision (the retinal after-image) reassembles as a whole. While the individual frames are not a perceptible part of film viewing, proto-cinematic imaging techniques were, as Thomas Elsaesser notes in a very different context, consumed with a frenzy of the visible that became a frenzy for the di-visible (and vice versa). In the late nineteenth-century, Marey’s chronophotography, Muybridge’s split-second photographs of human and animal motion, Charcot’s photographic analyses of hysterical tics, de la Tourette’s indexical charts of the footprint, Bertillon’s comparative photographic charts of the physical features of criminals and Taylor’s analyses of and prescriptions for efficient industrial production all break-down images into their smallest possible constituent parts and reassemble them as a series. All of these techniques focused their gaze on the human body — and on human gesture in particular.

In the most general sense, gesture may be defined as a specific movement of a body (usually, but not necessarily, a human body) read as part of a system of signification. When we say that so-and-so made such-and-such a gesture, we usually then characterize that movement as “expressing” something — happiness, despair, frustration, etc. The term “gesture” denotes then a movement that can potentially be read or interpreted as indicating something about its mover’s physical, emotional, or intellectual being. In the above-mentioned studies, gesture is divided, systematized, analyzed, classified. Taylor’s industrial efficiency studies attempt, for example, to discover through photographic analysis any individual expressivity contained in the gestures of factory workers — and to excise it in favor of perfectly homogenous and efficient movements synchronized with the hands of the clock.

According to Agamben, these techniques both reflect and produce “a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere.” “By the late nineteenth-century,” he argues, “the gestures of the Western bourgeoisie were irretrievably lost.” The implication of his argument, which begins with a description of the imaging methods of de la Tourette and Charcot, is that these medico-legal-industrial analytics take over what was once the “possession” of the bourgeois individual, his gestures. The Western bourgeoisie, “bereft of all that is natural to them,” are dispossessed of gestures that have historically worked both to constitute individuality per se and to allow individuals to relate
to one another through a set of legible psycho-physiological postures. As these postures are broken down and analyzed, exposed and taken over by what Agamben calls “an eye of this kind,” the expressions of the individual and the “images” which are the basis of their communication, are exposed and de-composed. The fragments of this analytic procedure become, in Agamben’s terms, “indecipherable,” and the Western world is caught in a crisis of human gesture, and of the meaning and the interpretation of the human itself. It is at this point, he argues, that the bourgeoisie “falls a victim of interiority and entrusts itself to psychology.”

III. Aesthetic Responses: The Physiognomic Documentary

In cinematic aesthetics, it is not the decomposition of gesture that is apparent but rather the novel manner in which human experience is recomposed from a new arrangement of the elements that constitute figure and ground. In the early era of cinema, it is not then accidental that one of the dominant philosophical controversies was played out between, on one side, an atomic or atomized image and, on the other, a conception of the Gestalt, the “whole” that precedes its parts. In the contested space between the atomic and the holistic image is the (re)construction of human gesture and of the human itself. While psychoanalysis became, no doubt, the primary hermeneutic for the interpretation of human experience, a tendency of modernist thought which (to name only those whose work is connected to cinema) is perhaps best exemplified by the works of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Antonin Artaud, Dziga Vertov and Carl Th. Dreyer sought to explore the connection between image and body through examinations of the manner in which mediatic phenomena themselves worked to constitute this connection in a novel way.

Carl Th. Dreyer’s 1928 silent masterpiece, La passion de Jeanne d’Arc, is an exemplary text in this regard. Dreyer asserts that he wants to “use the camera to drive away the camera” and this fight against the camera occurs largely as a response to cinema’s fragmentation and recomposition of the human figure.

Dreyer uses the camera, in Joan of Arc, both to record the effect of cinema’s decomposition of the human body and to show how cinema itself may restore the body’s expressions. To a very great degree, the style of the film, its formal strategy, tells its story. Dreyer’s obsessive focus on the face, on bodily gesture, on the base facticity of objects, ascribes to material reality itself an expressivity. Gesture, as Dreyer materializes it in the image, regains the power it has lost in the modern regime of observation and analysis. What is particularly interesting about this film in regard to a modern “scopic regime” is its overt positioning of the cinematic both as a part of modern culture’s disciplinary apparatus and as an instrument of its subversion. Dreyer investigates the site at which vision is coupled with gesture and uses a historical event to highlight the instability of this site — and its centrality to the workings of both the aesthetic and the political. Despite
Dreyer’s assertion of the film’s fidelity to “actual” events, the film is focused on the resonance of Joan’s story in a modern world rather than on her properly (or conventionally conceived) historical importance. Joan was not canonized until nineteen-twenty and her canonization stood, at the time Dreyer conceived and executed the film, as an example of an overt reversal of historical decision and historical record. The film begins with a close-up of hands opening the official record of Joan of Arc’s trial. The first three text intertitles, intercut with shots of the hands flipping through the book’s pages, announce that “Reading [the record], we discover the real Joan...not in armor, but simple and human... ... and we are witness to an amazing drama: a young, pious woman confronted by a group of orthodox theologians and powerful judges.” Dreyer appears to posit — between the trial, the written record, and the film we are watching — a relationship of precise replication. The text’s conclusion, that “we discover the real Joan” is a result, or so it would seem, of the trial’s precise recording: “the questions of the judges and Joan’s responses,” one intertitle reads, “were recorded exactly.”

The film narrates only the period of Joan’s trial during which she is held captive at Rouen and tried by a jury of priests, is convicted and then recants her original testimony, withdraws her recantation and is finally burned at the stake. At issue in her examination by the ecclesiastical court are both the truth and the source of the “visions” which inform her of the righteousness of France’s victory and compel her to don men’s clothing and lead the French army at Orleans. Despite its religious subject, Joan of Arc is not an evangelical film. As Dreyer himself indicates, he is concerned with the juridical legislation and policing of vision — and the formal coordinates of the film allegorize the dispute over the truth of vision depicted in the film’s diegesis. The stakes of this dispute over visual truth could not, of course, be higher. At the intersection of theology and politics, national identity and individual identity, warfare and torture, revelation and reality is the fragile body of a nineteen-year-old girl.  

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11 Image as Gesture
Kracauer reads *Joan of Arc* as one of the only successful attempts to make the generally uncinematic genre of the history film genuinely cinematic. Dreyer, he argues, sidesteps the staginess that characterizes the historical film by focusing on the materiality of faces and objects. The price Dreyer pays for this strategy, according to Kracauer, is the sacrifice of a “real world” of the film, a setting or environment that would be as “real” as the stunning faces of its inhabitants.\(^{12}\) It is rather, however, precisely the unreality of the minimal and largely unadorned set that throws Dreyer’s series of *tableaux*, the close-ups of faces and objects, and the painterly compositions of the wider shots, into relief, endowing them with their hyper-real effects. The film also reveals a different kind of historical — or historiographical — agenda. Dreyer’s foregrounding of physiological detail (against the background of the “no-man’s land neither past nor present”) needs to be read alongside his desire “to drive away the camera with the camera.”

The film’s explicit claim that an adherence to the text of the official record will show us “the real Joan” is complicated by Dreyer’s formal strategy, which is far from realist in the conventional sense. (Cinematic realism, determined by its own narrative and spatial codes, was already largely conventionalized by 1927.) Dreyer, however, posits an alternate realism. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is famous for its relentless use of close-ups, its focus on the face. But even the wider shots, with their unusual framing of parts of objects, and of faces and bodies, give the impression given by close-ups of a peculiar singling-out of a corner or segment of the world of the film. Kracauer calls Joan of Arc a “physiognomic documentary” and Dreyer charts the physiognomy of material objects as well as that of faces and bodies.\(^{13}\) The close-up of the metal shackles binding Joan’s ankles speaks her captivity, and her loss of freedom and agency at the hands of the court. The often grotesque, wrinkled and
blemished faces, the tonsured heads and knobby hands of Joan’s judges, fixed by the unblinking gaze of the camera, contrast with Joan’s smooth skin and open blue eyes. While Dreyer does, no doubt, echo the physiological typology common to mainstream film, his deconstruction of coherent cinematic space strains against the transubstantiation of physiology into essence. The absence of both the historical set-details common to period films and the heavy make-up almost mandatory in the silent era gives the film its documentary appearance and displays Dreyer’s unique conception of what the representation of the “real” Joan — and the real world — entails. The unadorned faces and sets are presented in a filmic space that, generally absent conventional depth-cues (and at times composed with Medieval painting in mind), is flattened. Against this nearly blank background, the close-ups of faces and objects highlight what David Bordwell calls an “awful tactility,” the singularity and intensity of an almost purely physical presence.14

The “scientific” fragmentation described by Agamben is not always visible within cinematic aesthetics which, while adopting its means, attempts to obscure them, reconstituting the body as a whole, a complete object. But the indivisible body remains as the invisible heart of cinema’s corporeal display. If the “awful tactility” of faces and objects stand out against a no man’s land in Dreyer’s film, they are thrown into even greater relief by the fragmented and impossible filmic space in which they appear. As Jonathan Crary has discussed in his analysis of different models of visuality, the particular disposition of viewing subject and viewed image in space in great part determines how the observer (the subject of the visual) is conceptualized.15 The dominant paradigm of vision, operative from the early Modern period until the mid-nineteenth century, he calls the “camera obscura” model. Here, a coherent subject and a coherent image are separated in a bounded space. The camera obscura, oft-discussed as a kind of early prototype of the camera, is a visual apparatus: a darkened room with a small hole in one wall, in which one sees, projected opposite of the aperture and upside-down, an image of the room’s exterior. Insofar as the camera obscura was not merely an optical apparatus but a model for the workings of vision per se, it posits a coherent subject, with clearly demarcated interior and
exterior, as the subject of vision. In the nineteenth-century, experiments
with and theories of vision — including Goethe’s color theories and Mueller’s
discovery that the stimulation of particular nerve endings would produce
visual images — indicated that vision took place not outside but rather within
the body and a physiological model of vision came to replace that of the
camera obscura. Despite science’s relocation of vision to the interior of the
body, visual apparatuses that utilized the effects of the corporeal production
of vision simultaneously denied them, claiming that their images were truer
to external reality than the visual effects achieved in painting and sculpture.
The stereoscope, for example, reconciled dual images through the synthesis
of binocular vision to produce a realistic picture. Though vision was largely
accepted as a physiological phenomenon by the scientific community, the
camera obscura model continued to govern both popular conceptions
regarding the veridicity of images and codes of realism in photography and
film.

The spatiality of physiological vision is not, of course, as easily
diagrammed as is the space of the camera obscura. If vision takes place, even
as a response to external stimuli, within the body — and yet appears outside
of it — the determination of the “truth” of a particular vision cannot take place
on the basis of a clear spatial mapping. Despite cinema’s reliance on
physiological processes (the retinal after-image) to produce the appearance
of movement, the space prescribed by dominant cinematic codes mirrors the
space of the camera obscura. Even if, it is essential to emphasize, space may
be inscribed in very different ways in individual films, the mythos of cinematic
realism that has determined classical cinematic aesthetics demands that the
space of the film be coherent. Conventional shot patterns (e.g., establishing
shot, point-of-view shot, counter shot) develop a relay of gazes (the look of
the camera and the exchanges of looks between characters) within a space
determined by exteriority, by the logical intervals between characters and set
elements and between audience and screen. Any vision that takes place
outside of this logical space is either excluded or — as in the case of the
flashback, the dream sequence, the musical production number — is marked
with indicators of its status in relation to the spatio-temporal unfolding of the
narrative. In Joan of Arc, the di-visible body that always underlies its
reconstruction as a cinematic image is made visible through Dreyer’s
decomposition of cinematic space.

What is indivisible is that which is also necessarily invisible, Joan’s
visions themselves. In Joan of Arc these visions are the invisible heart of the
story and the catalyst for all of its events — as well as the catalyst for the series
of historical events to which the film asserts its fidelity. Vision itself, and
particularly a vision processed in the body’s interior, is on trial. Before the
advent of photography and cinematography, to be “in camera” was to be “in
the chambers of a judge or other person of title.”16 In Joan, the central
character is literally in camera. Held prisoner in a castle in which all spaces
are legislated by her judges, she is tried for her allegedly “heretical” visions.
In an early trial scene, the camera trains itself on one of the judges; the intertitle that follows reads: "You have said that Saint Michael appeared to you, in what form? The scene cuts to Joan’s face. She is silent. “Had he wings?” the judge asks, “or a crown? How was Saint Michael robed?” The camera returns to the judge as he walks behind the others and demands: “How could you tell if he was a man or a woman? Was he naked?” A shot pans across the judges’ faces and again cuts back to Jean’s. She answers, “Do you think that God lacked the means to clothe him?” “Had he long hair?” “Why should he have cut it?” Joan responds. In this scene, the judges bear down on Saint Michael’s appearance to Joan; their questions about his gender and state of dress, or undress, attempt to portray Joan’s visions as sexual fantasy or symptoms of sexual hysteria, attributing them to a pathological version of corporeally generated vision that directly challenges the image’s rightful place outside the physical body and subjectivity of the observer. Later in the film, the judges question the source of Joan’s visions explicitly. Do they come from God? Or from the Devil? In the context of the film, with its priest-judges, the camera obscura is modeled along theological lines: The aperture through which light penetrates is the lens of the eye of God and only the church has the power to interpret its images. Visions generated outside this schema are pathologically corporeal, or diabolical, or both.

While the series of shots and text intertitles do follow a linear, narrative progression, the space they describe/produce subverts both the model of visuality that would guarantee objectivity — and the conventional cinematic space that reenacts the logic of the camera obscura. As Bordwell has noted, Joan of Arc contains over 1500 cuts and “fewer than thirty carry a figure or object over from one shot to another...fewer than fifteen constitute genuine eyeline matches.” When the camera scans the row of judges supposedly facing Joan during her questioning, the first judge looks to the right, the second looks up, the third slightly left of his neighbor, and so on down the row. Joan is thus not localized in a continuous perspectival field. The absence of eyeline matches cast each face as a kind of monad: the series of gazes fail to match up and each character appears to exist in a floating fragment of space. In shots containing what would typically be depth-indicators, doors,
walls, or windows, for example, the indicators themselves appear off-kilter. Later in the film, a judge peers through a peephole into Joan’s cell, and the peephole and the judge’s face loom larger than the room itself. The combination of individual shots does not constitute a whole, a complete picture, but rather segments the space in order to always suggest a world beyond the frame that is likewise composed of fragments.

The instability of visual truth has its emblem within the film. It appears numerous times inscribed on the walls of Rouen castle where Joan is imprisoned. This emblem is, quite literally, a textbook-example of a reversible figure: A vertical line extends into a right-side-up “V” at the top and an upside down “V” at the bottom. This diagram of a corner can be viewed, alternately, as walls extending either toward or away from its viewer (as Wittgenstein’s famous reversible figure appears from one perspective as duck, from the other as rabbit). The dispute over visual truth extends from a conflict about what Joan has seen to the problem her own appearance provokes in the visual order. The exchange regarding the apparition and appearance of Saint Michael is followed by another in which Joan’s own appearance is foregrounded. The judges question Joan as to why she wears men’s clothing and ask her of she will consent to change into those proper to her sex. She answers that God has commanded her to dress as a man and only after her work is finished will she resume dressing as a woman. “Then it is by God’s command that you dress like a man? What reward do you expect to obtain from our Lord?” Joan responds, “The salvation of my soul.” It is at this moment, at which the issue of vision is extended from Joan’s interior onto the terrain of her appearance to the vision of others, that Joan is first condemned as a heretic. One of the judges exclaims: “You blaspheme God!” The eye of God which insures the propriety of his own creation and its strict ordering cannot possibly have promised salvation to one whose very appearance disrupts this visual organization. In camera, Joan is condemned both for her visions themselves and for her disruption of a social order controlled by visual cues.
IV. Feedback Loops: Torture and Truth, Gesture and Image

Joan’s visions are resistant to decomposition and resistant to proof. Their invisibility makes them, for Dreyer, indisputable. Joan’s body, and its ability to signify even in death, is a marker of the indivisibility of her visions. This is an “irrational” correlation: the truth of the body / gesture is equivalent to the truth of vision. But the film exposes this correlation as the foundation of juridical and political power, a power which manipulates the body in order to establish its own (that is, the regime’s) truth. In Joan of Arc, the political and theological methods that work to control the visual order are explicitly played out on both the individual and the collective body. Insofar as Joan is a film about film — and about the visual regime of modernity more generally — it clearly locates human bodies and their gestures as the objects a scopic discipline ultimately attempts to control. The scene in which the judges escort Joan into the torture chamber and interrogate her there highlights the imbrication of visual display and bodily gesture. We never actually see Joan being tortured. What we do see is the threat of torture as it is embodied in the implements the priest-judges threaten to employ. The camera cuts back and forth between Joan’s terrified face and images of these implements: a water funnel, a series of serrated blades, and a spiked wheel that one of the judges turns faster and faster. The various blades appear as shapes against a mute background. The close-ups of the rotating spikes of the wheel take these shapes into motion. The physical implements of torture become objects in an almost abstract film sequence: against a white background, disengaged from establishing shots, they appear as brute shapes in various patterns of movement. But this does not make them any less fearsome. On the contrary. The movement of the cuts, back and forth between the objects and Joan’s face, establish these images as her images, her point of view. As she becomes increasingly terrified, her view narrows: the contorted blades and the spinning spikes expand, becoming her entire world. She cannot see beyond them.
Elaine Scarry argues that this kind of visual display is inherent to the structure of torture across contexts, transforming the victim’s pain into an image of the regime’s power. While the accounts of torture she explores are contemporary, the dynamic she describes is clearly evident in Dreyer’s film:

What assists the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power is an obsessive, self-conscious display of agency. On the simplest level, the agent displayed is the weapon. Testimony given by victims from many different countries almost inevitably includes descriptions of being made to stare at the weapon with which they were about to be hurt....

This mode of visual display, as Scarry argues and as we see in the scene of Joan’s threatened torture, is a means of reducing the torture victim’s world to a vision of the torturer’s and the regime’s power. “As physical objects, the weapons...represent the world in its most contracted and distilled form.” In the scene of Joan’s impending torture, actual physical pain is not required to effect this reduction.

While we do not see Joan tortured “officially,” she is unofficially tortured by the brutal guards assigned to police her in her cell and by the doctor who is called in to heal her. They guard her ring, crown her with straw, put a feather between the buttons of her coat, and seat her on a the one small stool in her cell: a farcical picture of, as they joke, a “daughter of God.” One of the guards makes a “frame” with his hands and peers through it to look at Joan, forcing her to play a role in the drama of her own humiliation. Even the smallest, most mundane objects and the furniture of her cell become implements of torture, the stool, the bed — any object that mirrors/allows the human postures and gestures of rest and movement — is converted by this “unofficial” arm of the regime into symbols of Joan’s physical captivity and powerlessness. Medicine too participates in Joan’s persecution. After Joan has seen the torture implements, she faints, and the judges fear that she is
ill and might die a natural death, thus annihilating her potential effectiveness as a political symbol. They bring in a doctor who bleeds her, piercing her arm with a thick blade and draining the spurting blood into a small metal basin. It is, of course, impossible to create an image of pain’s interior. The extreme privacy, the hyper-subjectivity of physical pain makes it inarticulate. The close-up shot of Joan’s pierced arm spurting blood is as close as Dreyer can come to imaging, to making public, the speechless interior of physical sensation.

In Joan of Arc, the camera’s focus on the corporeal tells the story of gesture as the site of both cultural discipline and its subversion. Widening its gaze beyond Joan’s individual plight in the final scene of Joan’s immolation and death, Joan of Arc images the imbrication of visual display and state violence as it is played out on a larger group of people, that is, on the crowd or “mob” that witnesses Joan’s execution. Joan’s struggle to maintain the truth of her own vision in the face of church and state authority and its overt use of violence is taken up by the crowd that has gathered in front of Rouen castle to witness her execution. The first shots of the scene alert us to the spectacular allure of the execution. Acrobats and contortionists perform their physical feats in the courtyard where the stake at which she is to be burned has already been set up. The physical ordeal of Joan’s death by fire is aligned with the physical performance of fairground and circus. Dreyer’s display of entertainments based on the most extreme bodily gestures mark his insistence on the movement of bodies as the privileged site, and the limit, of cultural discipline. During Joan’s drawn-out execution the crowd which had been scattered, circulating around the space of the courtyard to watch the various acts, coalesce as an audience that witnesses, sympathetically, Joan’s martyrdom. The camera shifts back and forth between close-ups of Joan’s face and body consumed by flames and the angry and tear-stained faces of the watching crowd. As the crowd’s sympathies obviously shift, the soldiers become alarmed. The ensuing scene replicates the dynamic we witnessed in Joan’s (threatened) torture where the camera focused on the “awful tactility” of the implements of impending violence: We see close-ups of spiked balls chained to long, wooden sticks being tossed down from a window of the castle to soldiers waiting below. Here, however, the soldiers actually use them, attacking the “mob” in an attempt to drive them from the scene.

Gesture in the scene of torture and gesture in cinema meet in their feedback to the public, the mass, as images. Scarry writes:

It is not accidental that in the torturers’ idiom the room in which the brutality occurs was called the ‘production room’ in the Philippines, the ‘cinema room’ in South Vietnam, and the ‘blue lit stage’ in Chile: built on these repeated acts of display and having as its purpose the production of a fantastic illusion of power, torture is a grotesque piece of compensatory drama.21
We might read the scene of torture as a kind of a limit case. In Agamben’s analysis, the medico-legal-industrial spheres use an imageric analytics to take over the gestures of individuals, and the display of these broken-down images of gesture feeds gestures back to their sources in alienated form. In the scene of torture, gesture is taken over by power (by the regime), and is fed back to the public as an emblem of this power. The “fantastic illusion of power,” in both scenarios, is produced as a kind of cinema and in the space of cinema: the production room, the cinema room, the blue lit stage. This may appear, at least at first glance, to place the cinematic (as a mediatic phenomenon) always in the service of the “regime.” In Joan of Arc, Dreyer “uses the camera to drive away the camera,” displaying gesture’s other face in order to shake gesture free of this possession. Gesture escapes juridical legislation both within the diegesis and in the formal strategy of the film. Joan’s face, and her final gestures, are preserved in the minds of those that witness her execution and martyrdom — and preserved by the film. Preserved, but also re-vised, revisioned. The film, which positions itself initially as a precise replication of the written text of Joan’s trial, enters the public sphere as a kind of treatise, a testimony of a novel means for the face and the intimate movements of the body to tell a story, to “speak” across a historical distance of decision, indecision and revision of the same events.

It may be possible to read Dreyer’s presentation of a physiognomic “speech” as engaging the essentializing discourse which, in theories of gesture from the origins of
modernity to the present, has posited gesture as a kind of natural or originary language. Dreyer’s fragmentation of conventional cinematic space, however, his “illogical” cuts, his highlighting of the very instability of visual truth, underscores the construction of the cinematic body and of gesture itself. This work then needs to be positioned within the important tendency of modernist art and thought which seeks to claim gesture for the individual subject and for the collective, to reclaim it, with a startled recognition of the expanding forces of what we now call “biopolitics,” from the medical, scientific, and legal imperatives whose imaging techniques have aided in effecting its appropriation.

“Because it is centrally located in the gesture, not the image, cinema,” Agamben asserts, “essentially ranks with ethics and politics (and not merely with aesthetics).” The conception of the centrality of gesture to both the aesthetic and political spheres within modernity is not dependent on an essentializing discourse on the human body. This formulation ought rather to draw our attention (to echo here Marshall McLuhan’s famous dicta surrounding media as “the extensions of man”) to the prosthetic nature of media. The microscope and the telescope stretch our eyes into miniscule and distant worlds. The photograph immortalizes an instant of vision. While the spectator at the cinema is not plugged-in to the apparatus as is the cameraman who looks through the lens, spectatorship possesses the same prosthetic logic, extending into worlds which are at once the most distant and fantastic and the most intimate and everyday. The stories in which statues break their fetters and come to life, and those in which humans are immobilized and immortalized as tableaux vivants, remark what Agamben diagnoses as a polarity always inherent in images, and this special type of image pictures the break boundary between real and imagined worlds, between the worlds in which we live, move, and breath and the ones that we invent. The cinema creates an aesthetics of the break boundary that we experience not only visually and then audio-visually but also (and from the very beginning) tactiley and gesturally, as a prosthetic world that creates us as much as we create it. Dreyer develops Joan of Arc as an allegory of cinema itself. Opening the closed book of the trial record, Dreyer animates the Saint in a series of tableaux vivants, staging Joan’s trial as a contest between, on one side, gesture and a vision aligned with the body (with a totality of physical sensation and experience) and, on the other, hegemonic conceptions of a truth conceived as narrowly visual. Joan’s execution marks the destruction of both experience and ethics by political force. Dreyer’s claim that with The Passion of Joan of Arc he wants to “drive away the camera with the camera” marks his desire to unveil, beneath the seeming primacy of the visual in silent film, the gestural and ethical dimensions of cinema.
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7. Agamben 135.

8. Agamben 137.

9. As Daniel Tiffany observes, the “contest” between the atomic image and the Gestalt is not over. “...a complex and charged demonstration of epistemological atomism emerged in the 1990’s from the Rodney King trial in Los Angeles and, more specifically, from the defense counsel’s analysis of the infamous video of King’s beating by a group of police officers. Many believe that the jurors’ not-guilty verdict (which ignited the Los Angeles riots) stemmed directly from an argument contingent on the defense counsel’s frame-by-frame anatomy of the video evidence. In his attack on the jury’s naïveté [in a New York Times editorial], [Stanley] Fish unwittingly reproduces the classic opposition between associationism in psychology...and Gestalt theory.” *Toy Medium* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000) 165.


11. Joan hardly appeared as a fragile nineteen-year-old girl at Orleans where, dressed as a man, she led the French army. She becomes fragile in the face of a juridical authority that holds her life — and death — in its hands.


13. ibid 79.
16. Crary 42.
17. Bordwell 78.
20. ibid 38.