

Dancing the Other: Body as Instrument— Leroi-Gourhan 1

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Renowned choreographer Twyla Tharp begins one of her books (which I need to look up) describing how, when she goes to the studio to create a dance (i.e., to make dance in the parlance of choreographers), she needed to set aside her mind to let her body do the work.

For years I have had difficulty accepting her statement because it seemed to me to affirm the classic split and separation of the mind/brain and the body. At least she sets a primary role to the body seemingly acting first and in a fundamental way. It is also common to hear dancers refer to their bodies as their “instruments;” this too is a statement that has, for obvious reasons, not set well with me.

While I continue to find issue with Tharp’s statement, over time I have come increasingly to understand dancing in terms of what I often refer to as “self-othering” by which I refer to that remarkable and paradoxical distinction of dancing in which the dancer becomes, in her dancing, something or someone other than who she is, and does so in the most embodied possible way. She becomes the body of an other, yet with the other experienced as her own body in the fullest proprioceptive and experiential way. In the act of dancing, she is the other in the fullest sense, yet she also remains herself, the dancer, the one dancing.

I want to explore this notion in the context of the perspectives on gesture developed by the paleoethnographer André Leroi-Gourhan, particularly in his 1964 book *Gesture and Speech* and with a great deal of assistance from Carrie Noland’s insightful analysis of his work. I believe that approaching dancing from Leroi-Gourhan’s understanding of gesture will help me better understand Twyla Tharp’s intended meaning, the common statement of dancers that their bodies are their instruments, and finally it will allow me to clarify and enrich my foundational notion of self-othering.

Leroi-Gourhan’s work was paleoethnography, that is, one who writes about the significance of Paleolithic cultures based on an analysis of the artifacts that have survived. The Paleolithic Era is prehistoric and is of interest especially because it is the period distinguished by the development of the first stone tools. Wow! How could this have anything at all to do with Twyla Tharp a postmodern choreographer or with dancing for that matter?

Leroi-Gourhan’s approach to understanding prehistoric tools was distinguished by his remarkable focus on the gestures required to manipulate the tools; “the lived, somatic-kinesthetic experience of being a human body engaged in interaction with tools.”¹ He believed that the human invents itself in the techniques of body accompanying the invention of tools. This statement and our images of the spear-throwing prehistoric hunter may remind us of our earlier discussion of this form of throwing remaining today as the exemplar of proper throwing and still inseparable from the male gender. Yet, Leroi-

¹ Noland, ???

Gourhan's insights are much greater. Beyond holding that tools are nothing without the gestures that manipulate them, he understood this gesturing in a very sophisticated way as being also "evaluative, a form of perception, adaptation, and creation."² That is, the gestures by which tools are manipulated not only provide insight into the lived bodies of the tool makers/users as sensorimotor program and operating chains of gestures, but these gestural patterns and chains must also be appreciated for their heuristic significance, for the part they play in understanding the world and oneself. Tools, then from Leroi-Gourhan's perspective, are inseparable from movement, from gesture, both in having agency in the world in the simple sense of the obvious effects of the tool's impact (killing animals or obtaining food, for example), but also as the means by which humans come to create themselves and to understand and create the world around them. This latter aspect, clearly the most surprising and important I think, will require our further careful attention to Leroi-Gourhan's theory of gesturing.

Leroi-Gourhan focused on the human hand as the first tool, understanding "the hand as a gesture that produces kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and haptic knowledge"³ Through evolution the eventual upright posture that coincided with the emergence of human beings permitted emphasis on the hand and the face. Posture is linked to modes of movement and certainly to the distinction of hands and the predominance of the face. Thus, he argued, "modes of motility and gesturing could thus be taken as defining features of being human."⁴ With the hand being understood as the first tool, understandable in terms of the modes of movement, that is, the gesturing that makes the hand a tool, we can begin to see the relevance of Leroi-Gourhan's perspectives on dancing and on self-othering. When the hand becomes tool it is in some sense set apart from the integrity of the body as an other, as a tool used by and extending the body, yet it is at once also one's hand. The hand as the first tool becomes the locus for the first act of self-othering, that which is me (my hand) is also something which is other (a tool), yet they are proprioceptively and experientially identical and inseparable from me. As the hand is the first tool, we can begin to see the progress to the arm as tool, the leg as tool, and eventually the entire body as tool, or, as dancers, perhaps inspired by musicians, more commonly refer to it as "instrument." Thus dance technique can be understood as the gestural patternings by which the body is used as tool, yet, while this is a separation of body from dancer, it is also a self-othering of dancer, because the "technique of body" we would understand as distinguishing a dancing, is inseparable from the proprioceptive and experiential aspects of the dancer. Dancing, as gesturing, then can be seen as self-transcendence in that the dancer becomes something "other," something "not self," yet, by means of techniques of body, gesturing, then is fully integrating of all aspects of being human in a world that is other. Wow! how cool!

We can begin to comprehend Leroi-Gourhan's understanding of the heuristic or exploratory aspects of gesturing as we follow his analysis of human evolution. He argued that "gesture always seeks 'contact' or touch, that is, a progressively better accomplishment of the gestural intention. Gesture is in service to agency. Gesture is always developed through touch contact, through sensation, especially

² Ibid., p. ???

³ Ibid., p. ???

⁴ Ibid., p. ???

interoception.”⁵ Leroi-Gourhan had a delightful way of describing this aspect of gesturing as *tâtonnement* a French word which means trial and error, but which Noland translates delightfully as “groping.” There is an innate primacy of movement, as we have elsewhere discussed, that is characterized in early life as “groping,” a dynamism akin to play, by which through contact with the world in self-movement we come to discover and create ourselves and the world in which we live. This groping is, Leroi-Gourhan argues, a distinctive characteristic of all gesturing. As we are discussing throughout this section on gesturing and dancing, Leroi-Gourhan understands that “gestures connect muscles with mind” in the creation of a skillset, in the use of skillsets which then develop and are used to alter skillsets. Or in more neurophysiological terms gestures engage sensorimotor patterns which require complex systemic integrated interaction between the central nervous system (the brain) and the interoceptors (the proprioceptors in the muscles and ligaments) in the complete integration of the human being. There simply can be no separation of mind and body in gesturing. And, further, as gesturing is always seeking contact it must always be understood as relational, as the body in relation to the other, to the environment, which is always being explored, contacted, engaged in the gesturing. Gesturing must also be seen as the integration of the parts of the body, easily separable by objectifying or isolating body parts as tools.

Leroi-Gourhan discussed the acquisition of gestures. He understood that movements become gestural programs through not only groping, but also in apprenticeship through mime and by verbal instruction. We well know that we learn most movement behavior through simply imitating others. Often this is unconscious, but in dancing, for example, it is often quite deliberate. We are very familiar with dancers arranged in lines across a dance floor imitating a teacher’s movements as she performs them in front of us. We use mirrors to self-assess the accomplishment of mimetic similarity. I well remember trying to find a location on the dance floor where I could see not only the teacher but also my own reflection close to hers so that I could align my movements with hers. Verbal instruction is common as well both inside and outside of dancing. We are told to straighten an arm, to lift the head, to curve the spine, and so on. In some cultures—I saw this in Thailand and Java—dancers are instructed by the teacher who actually physically repositioning the bodies of the dancers. We also understand that practice (high repetitions of self-conscious self-movement) is essential to building the sensorimotor programming that gives us ownership of these gestures. And, clearly, this process we appreciate actually changes our bodily tissues across the neurophysiological range that is engaged in the gestural patterns. We become our gestures in a quite literal sense.

Leroi-Gourhan also understood gestures as occurring in “complex operating chains.” As we move through our lives isolated gestures are rare and interestingly they are often of the explicit visual actions that are identical with the “poor” understanding of gesturing. As, for example, infants learn to lift a spoon and retain a horizontal position to avoid spilling to finally hit their mouths with food to nourish themselves. In child development this is a marvelous achievement. It requires much attention, assistance, verbal instruction, and seemingly endless exemplification. Yet, this gestural pattern becomes the base for increasingly complex operating chains that are involved simply in preparing food and eating

⁵ Ibid., p. ???

it. The use of a spoon can eventuate in what we call the culinary arts. Complex operating chains of gestural patterns building on one another seemingly endlessly in not only the art of eating using many tools and skilled movements, but extending into the preparation of food with endless possibilities of gestural patternings.

Dancing is obviously similar. There are basic gestural patterns that underlie the distinctive features of each dance form. In sports we refer to these as the “fundamentals” and they are routinely practiced and repeated almost endlessly. One thinks of the endless hours of the ballet dancer throughout her career doing *barre* exercises with constant critique from the dance teacher.

The acquisition of gestures and the building of them into complex chains is one that actually creates a super skill. If we are learning our first form of dance, for example, every aspect of the technique is new and often requires persistence through a long stage of awkwardness, discomfort, self-consciousness, sore muscles and an overtaxed brain. Yet, if we are accomplished in one dance form, learning another allows us to not only borrow from the gestural patterns build for the first dance form, it actually allows us to use a super skill set which is that all dance gestural patterns are easier to acquire. This super skill set is what in other contexts I talk about as the acuity gained through demanding self-movement. Interestingly, highly developed complex gestural chains become adept at improvisation and the groping aspects by which these movements explore ourselves and our relationship to the environment.