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Gestures, Attunements and Atmospheres: On Photography and Urban Space

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ABSTRACT

Developed through a series of conceptual analyses (Edmund Husserl, Vilém Flusser, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin) and case studies (Fernando Lopes's *Belarmino* and Jeff Wall's *Mimic*), this article delves into the relationship between gesture, attunement and atmosphere and how it unfolds in photographic works dealing with urban space. The first section focuses on the role played by photography in the film *Belarmino*, which raises questions about both the representation of urban phenomena and issues related to expression and gesture in boxing. The second section discusses Husserl's thinking on image consciousness and his surprising reference to a "photograph" of a boxer, which reveals the relevance of his phenomenological approach when it comes to defining the aesthetic properties of gesture-images. The third section examines the principles of Flusser's philosophy of gestures, focusing on the semantic field of attunement and its connection with various elements related to photography, gesture, moods and affects. The question of gesture in photography—both the gestures of the photographed and those of the photographer—can be articulated with the notions of attunement and atmosphere, which go beyond semiological, psychological and communicational approaches and are important for our understanding of aesthetic and artistic experiences. Finally, if photography is a privileged way of studying atmospheres and gestures (as suggested by the Benjaminian notion of optical unconscious) and their connection with the inner life of the subject, in relation to urban space this study often acquires an intersubjective, social and political dimension, as in Jeff Wall's *Mimic*.

1. First round: *Belarmino*

Let us begin with an example, both photographic and cinematographic, that brings into play the issues of gesture and expression. The first sequence of the Portuguese film *Belarmino* is composed of photographs that present the boxer Belarmino Fragoso, initially with close-ups and then with a more distanced approach that follows him walking through the streets of Lisbon. This film, directed in 1964 by Fernando Lopes—one of the driving forces behind the new Portuguese cinema—is constructed around this character, freely exploring the boundaries of documentary and fiction.[1]

The photography work is by Augusto Cabrita (himself a photographer), and this initial sequence, combining still images with the jazz music that runs throughout the entire film, announces that we are standing before a portrait: in the first images we see only his tough face in a variety of expressions, but in the last ones his body is photographically detached from the crowd in the city. Facing the camera while the other passers-by are walking in the opposite direction, he is aware of being photographed and playing a role, representing himself, here and throughout the film (Figures 1–3).
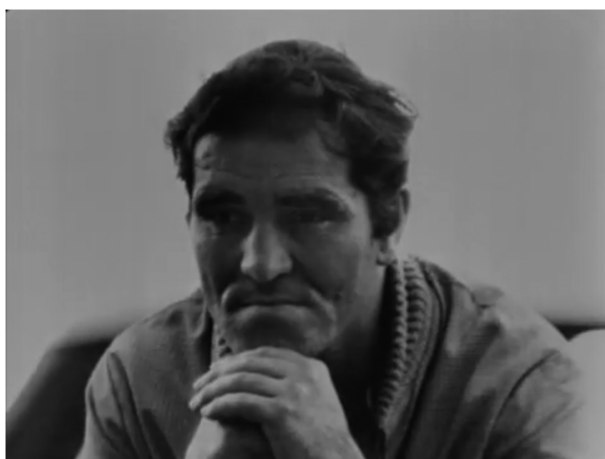

Figure 1. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

Figure 2. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

Figure 3. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

In the sequence featuring the boxing match between Belarmino and the Spaniard Tony Alonso, there is a second important use of photographs that briefly but increasingly interrupt the moving images. The scene is filmed and edited in a way that oscillates between involvement in the fight and a more analytical stance, almost abstract, which experiments with various approaches to the ring, the boxers and the stories recalled by Belarmino. As the fight progresses, the photographs gradually take up more space, and the last images are just snapshots that show the boxers' various gestures and expressions (Figures 4–6).

Following Deleuze, each of these snapshots, though singular and remarkable, is an "any-instant-whatever" that is simultaneously torn out and reverted to movement and the whole of the film.[2] Mingling with and contaminating the other parts, the photographs

Figure 4. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

Figure 5. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

Figure 6. Fernando Lopes, *Belarmino*, 1964.

—both those of the introductory shots and those of the boxing match—belong to the study of this character, of his physiognomy and gestures in the ring and in the streets, as both a ring fighter and a "street fighter."[3] There are also several scenes that take place in Belarmino's domestic space, in cafes and in the street, where he is observed from

a distance as he goes about his daily life—one who, among other small jobs to earn a living, also retouches photographs. Thus, filmed gestures and atmospheres are an intrinsic part of the study of this urban character.

But why photographs? And how do they help to account for both the expressive strength involved in physical combat and the daily, small gestures of modern living? Let us shift our focus to the relationship between photography and urban space.

First of all, these initial snapshots seem to rescue Belarmino from the streets, fixing his face and body, allowing him to share his story. In this sense, they are an opening gesture that contributes to the film's additional aim: to provide a portrait of the center of Lisbon in the 1960s, during a dictatorship that cultivated a series of propaganda images. Subverting these images, looking at the hidden traits of this once well-known figure in boxing, who embodies both the glory and the failures of a career and a country (the idea of "what could have been" permeates the film), was also a way of ventilating the social atmosphere. On the other hand, in several senses it breaks with a certain tradition in Portuguese cinema, not only because of the topics addressed but also because of its formal and experimental features. Moreover, it belongs to an international movement that was taking film out into the streets while at the same time bringing the unpredictability of the streets into the filmic construction.

Second, this film both directly and indirectly extends Baudelaire's understanding of the "heroism of modern life," of the transient beauty that arises from the particular passions that can be found among "the pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences—criminals and kept women—which drift about in the underworld of a great city."[4] Baudelaire saw, rightly, that this underworld provides access to the tensions of historical time, the contradictions of modern metropolitan life and its poetic motifs: "The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvellous; but we do not notice it."[5] Unveiling this marvelous world, detecting its atmosphere, is a task that continues to challenge us today.

Thus, *Belarmino* discovers the *atmosphere* of the wonderful mundane of Lisbon, and the initial photographs account for this discovery. In fact, photography and cinema are apt for accessing the subterranean world, or at least that which easily goes unnoticed in daily life. On this topic, it is also worth mentioning two examples from the history of photography. The first concerns Nadar's photographs of the sewers of Paris, which, according to Walter Benjamin, have a political meaning connected to their function of discovery, of revealing the hidden world of great cities.[6] The second is Jacob Riis's powerful *How the other half lives*, which portrays the precarious living conditions of the most disadvantaged classes in New York at the end of the nineteenth century, following its profound urban transformations and the great migration movements of the time. These are mainly subterranean images, either portraying the population's living, working and leisure spaces or portraying an exterior that, in a certain sense, is also out of view, overshadowed by the "favoured half."

This initial foray into *Belarmino* and, particularly, into its two short but incisive uses of photographic images aims to set the tone for reflection on gesture in photography: gesture in urban space, but also gesture in a boxing match. Let us then be guided by the coincidence that both the film *Belarmino* and a short text by the philosopher Edmund Husserl point to—making us see and think with—the snapshots of a boxer. The Husserlian and further conceptual explorations of gesture will allow us to "return to

the street" with a different philosophical armor. What follows is less about extending the cinematic dimension of *Belarmino* and more about delving into the expressive intensity of photography and gesture and how it connects to the topics of attunement and atmosphere in urban space.

2. A boxer with a stomachache

Husserl's reference to boxing and photography appears in a sort of imaginary description belonging to his texts on *image consciousness*. Before analyzing it, some contextualization is in order. Volume XXIII of the Husserliana, translated as *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, Memory (1898–1925)*, gathers texts (mostly annotations) on phenomena related to re-presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*), that is, memory, expectation, fantasy, imagination and image consciousness, the latter being "the kind of experience one has in looking at paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, and theatrical productions."[7] With few exceptions, these texts are a reflection not on specific images but on acts of consciousness related to our experience with images. In broad terms, they address phenomena that are not of the order of presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*), of perception as having things themselves in a direct way. However, the relations between perception and image consciousness are complex, and fluctuations arise in the course of Husserl's analyses—to start with, in relation to the very concept of the image. Even at the level of common sense, we see that an image presupposes both a physical thing and the image object, that which appears in this physical thing. But this division is not enough, and Husserl uses the example of a photograph to demonstrate it,[8] establishing that, in physical imagination, there are not just two constituents or objects but three: 1) the physical image (*physische Bild* or *perceptum*), i.e. the canvas, paper or stone that functions as a physical (and perceptual) support; 2) the image object (*Bildobjekt* or *fiktum*), i.e. the image that appears in the physical image and which itself has no existence; and 3) the image subject (*Bildsujet* or *imaginatum*), i.e. that which is represented by the image object or that to which the image object refers—that which, although it does not appear, is imagined. In addition to distinguishing these three phenomenological objects, Husserl establishes the relation between them, which is one of conflict. At base, image consciousness arises through these internal conflicts. It is because the image object conflicts with perception—that is, because the image that appears does not belong to perception and its horizon (the wall, the room, etc.)—that it becomes a fiction, a *fiktum*.[9]

The image object, although it is apprehended by consciousness, is "truly nothing," because what justifies the image is the fact that it represents or substitutes something; in other words, it refers to an absent presence.[10] Taken in itself, the image object is a complex of sensory contents that consciousness apprehends and upon which another apprehension is built. Thus, there is a second order of relation and conflict, this time concerning the image object and the image subject. Between these there must be a relation of *similarity* which is not given in an external way. From the point of view of phenomenological description, the image subject is immanent to the image object, intuitively present in it, so that when we look at an image we are in the presence of the represented.[11]

This theory of aporetic representation should not be hastily dismissed through general critiques of representation and resemblance, however. Because it presupposes a necessary re-presentation of the image subject as a condition of our experience of images, image consciousness has a strong reproductive character, but it is also built on a play of conflicts that is part of the various modalities of appearance. This does not exactly concern the Kantian free play of imagination, but even so, Husserl remains sensitive to the pleasure triggered by aesthetic appearances.[12] His texts problematize the consciousness of objects and the respective existential position in aesthetic experience—through the accentuation of the mode of appearance of the object (*Erscheinungsweise des Gegenstandes*), a problematization that reflects a dynamic and unstable process.[13]

Rather than analyzing these acts of consciousness in detail and discussing them technically, I would like to focus on a particular passage, which is preceded by a series of annotations concerning aesthetic appearance and the relationship between form and function in inanimate objects. Husserl brings together the model of "instant photography" and bodily expression in order to reflect upon the aesthetic presentation of human beings:

> So, too, in the presentation of human beings. Groups. Not masses of human bodily members, in the presence of which one would not really know where or to what the members belong. To which head do these legs, these arms, and so on, belong? What is she doing, where is he standing? Characteristic position. Instant photography: Among the innumerable particular positions that actually occur, which is the one "noticed"? And among those that are noticed, which is the "best"? Every nerve, every muscle, attuned to the action. Nothing indifferent, nothing random. Etc. As much expression as possible; that is to say: the excitation with the greatest possible wealth of appearance, the most powerful and most intuitive excitation possible of the consciousness of the object – specifically, not of the "human being" as a physical thing but of the human being in its function, in its activity (a pugilist), in its doing and suffering, which is supposed to be precisely the object of presentation. With as much unity as possible. The pugilist can, of course, simultaneously have a stomachache, and the gripes can express themselves in his grimace. Now that would be a beautiful aesthetic object: A pugilist or discus thrower who simultaneously has a stomachache.[14]

With the human element, new issues come into play. Firstly, human beings in groups seem to demand a "characteristic position." Instant photography is an "instrument" that allows for the detection of the most "noticed" singular position, the "best" one, and this all seems to take place at a microscopic level related to the possibility of arresting movement.[15] Muscles attuned to action and the maximum intensity in the performance of a function by the "portrayed" account for the territory of expressive gestuality. This *attunement* between body and action has an aesthetic quality, and Husserl emphasizes that aesthetic appearances do not express in the "manner of an empty sign" but always express something "from *within*, through their moments, through moments of analogy."[16] Therefore, we pass from relatively undifferentiated human movements, proper to a group of people, to the maximum intensity of the aesthetic appearance as it is embodied by the gestures and expressions of the photographed boxer. He activates, as it were, "the most powerful and most intuitive excitation possible of the consciousness of the object," with "object" here meaning the human being in his/her doing and suffering.

The quoted passage highlights a dimension of the image that goes beyond a mere relation of similarity between reality and its representation. As Claudio Rozzoni observes, it is a "fruitful instant" in which something "seems *to be untouched by the difference between image consciousness and perceptual consciousness*: an action, a tension, a feeling, an atmosphere, forces."[17] In other words, this entails a broader understanding of the image, in the sense that the aesthetic mode of appearance, without disregarding the perceptive and existential interest in the object (or human being), gives rise to an experience rich in expressive, affective and atmospheric elements.

Returning to the photographs of *Belarmino*, we find the coincidence that they also build a bridge between the relatively undifferentiated movements in the streets of Lisbon and the intensity of expression and gesture. In the first place, Belarmino's instantaneous photographs isolate him; he is immersed in daily life but also rescued from it. In the second place, the maximum expression is shown through his activity as a boxer.

Another aspect adds a further layer of complexity to all this, as the boxer could have a stomachache, and his expression of suffering could come from the pain rather than the activity in which he is intensively engaged. Beyond the anecdotal element of this formulation, which is not thoroughly explored by Husserl, lies a problematic issue concerning expression, particularly as it is captured through photography: the most "noticed" position, or the most intense expression of the relation between body and function, although it expresses something from within the subject, does not necessarily correspond to a fixed and determined inner state. After all, the stomachache reflected in the boxer's face accounts for an insurmountable potential ambiguity which, without eliminating the intensity of gestures and expressions, reveals the intrinsic modulation and affective character of human life.

Wittgenstein, who applied his analytic sharpness to these issues, observed that certain aspects of expression, such as the "subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone," belong to those "imponderable evidences" that can convince us of the genuine character of a given feeling, even when we are unable to describe the difference between a genuine and a pretended feeling.[18] On the other hand, he emphasizes the oscillations at work in the interpretation of an expression, something that is intrinsically related to the theme of the change of aspect. In "Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment" (previously known as "Part II") from the *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes:

> I say: "I can think of this face (which gives an impression of timidity) as courageous too." We do not mean by this that I can imagine someone with this face perhaps saving someone's life (that, of course, is imaginable in connection with any face). I am speaking, rather, of an aspect of the face itself. Nor do I mean that I can imagine that this man's face might change so that it looked courageous in the ordinary sense, though I may very well mean that there is a quite definite way in which it can turn into a courageous face. The reinterpretation of a facial expression can be compared to the reinterpretation of a chord [*der Umdeutung eines Akkords*] in music, when we hear it as a modulation first into this, then into that, key.[19]

The connection between imponderable evidence and modulation allows one to consider the question of gesture and expression in a way that goes beyond a simplistic understanding of them as exterior manifestations of an inner state and beyond a mere communicative and semiological framework. By arresting gestures, photography becomes a precious tool for analyzing the modulation inherent to forms of life. A part of the dynamic aspect of modulation is necessarily lost through this arrest, but at the same time

a new world opens up before our eyes. And this happens from the outset because, as Eli Friedlander remarks, "gesture by being an arrest of action acquires an inherently discrete and independent quality."[20] In other words, from the Laocoön sculpture to Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*, there is a longstanding tradition of practices and discussions around immobilized gestures in art, but gestures in photography, which comprise and unfold the photographic "evidential power [*force d'évidence*],"[21] contribute in a singular manner to an artistic playing field where expressive strength, ambiguity and construction go hand in hand.

3. Gesture and attunement

When referring to the attunement of muscles and action as it appears in the "snapshot" of the boxer, Husserl uses the German verb *abstimmen*, which means to attune, tune or coordinate. Wittgenstein also makes use of a musical analogy to account for the particular modulation at work in the interpretation of expression and gesture. In this sense, it is certainly not by chance that Vilém Flusser also resorts to this semantic field in order to develop fundamental concepts of his philosophy of gestures, explained in the chapter "Gesture and Affect: The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gestures" ("Geste und Gestimmtheit: Einübung in die Phänomenologie der Gesten").[22] In the latter, two concepts stand out in particular: *Stimmung* and *Gestimmtheit*. Both have very rich and complex meanings, making them difficult to translate into English. Translatable as mood/chord and affect/attunement, respectively, Flusser leaves them relatively undefined, as if their meaning could only be obtained through the observation and description of gestures. This is a vicious circle that is interrupted, however, by the existence of a criterion: on the one hand, I recognize myself in the gestures of the other; on the other hand, introspection enables me to know when I myself am passively externalizing a gestural mood/ chord and when I am actively representing it.[23] Therefore, one can interpret Flusser's reluctance to define these concepts as an attitude that is in line with their polysemy, contributing to maintaining their dynamic character in the context of a philosophy of gestures.

Both concepts derive from the radical *Stimm-*, which originates from the verb *stimmen* (to tune) and from *Stimme* (voice). *Stimmung*, in turn, can mean tuning, tone, atmosphere, mood, agreement or chord. *Gestimmtheit*, which preserves the meaning of both attunement and affect, refers, in Flusser's text, to the condition of possibility of *Stimmung*, of particular chords and moods. The use of these notions is meant to rescue the understanding of gestures both from a causal and mechanistic perspective and from one supported by notions of semiology, such as code, context or message. Gestures inevitably have a conventional and semiological dimension, but Flusser considers them in ways that are not exhausted by it.

Hence the importance of *attunement*: we can read a gesture, interpret it or react to it because it reflects a human dynamic and expressive sphere whose patterns are not completely defined beforehand. And this is built on the affective grounds established with what is happening around us and in ourselves. We are in the world not only according to momentary moods and affections but also according to this condition of permanent tuning and affection. Even if Flusser does not mention it, these notions are

crucial to the existential analyses in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The affective disposition or mood (*Gestimmtheit*) belongs to the disposition (*Befindlichkeit*) of *Dasein*, accounting for its openness to the world. *Gestimmtheit* is a condition that underlies the affective relationships of our being-in-the-world.[24]

It is now time to consider the deeper relevance of these considerations for aesthetics and, particularly, for our enquiry into gesture in photography:

> The question is not whether the representation of a chord/mood (*Stimmung*) is false, still less whether a represented chord/mood has the capacity to be true. Rather, it concerns whether the observer is touched. If I accept that affect/attunement (*Gestimmtheit*) is a chord/mood transformed into gesticulation, my primary interest is no longer in the chord/mood but in the effect of the gesture. As they appear in symptoms and as I experience them through introspection, chords/moods throw up ethical and epistemological problems. Affect, conversely, presents formal, aesthetic problems. Affect releases chords/moods from their original contexts and allows them to become formal (aesthetic) – to take the form of gestures. They become "artificial."[25]

Following this line of reasoning, the aesthetic importance of a gesture arises not from its correspondence to a private inner state and whether or not it is deceptive, but rather from the way it affects the spectator, making him/her enter the atmosphere and the expressive field of the gestures performed or represented. Furthermore, the very concept of a gesture can help to explain what art is and how it relates to human feelings and moods. Hence the importance of artifice, understood as the transformation of moods into artistic gestures, which seems to deepen or at least complement the power of images that—to recover Husserlian terms—focus on the mode of appearance of objects and human beings. Artifice can be part of an artistic exploration of the expressive intensity of human actions and passions (such as boxing and urban gestures).

Let us now focus on photography, or, more precisely, on the gesture of photographing, which is one of the gestures that Flusser describes in his book, starting from an imaginative scene in which a photographer captures the image of a seated man smoking a pipe. In its intersubjective complexity—implying a tension with the world and others—the gesture of photographing is *also*, or perhaps *above all*, a gesture of attunement. This means that neither the photographer, nor the photographed subject, nor the viewers of the scene can be seen as abstract, immobile, unchanging subjects or objects. In a certain sense, and although Flusser does not say so explicitly, the gestures of the photographer reveal this movement of becoming attuned to the world and to the photographed subject, which necessarily presupposes the technical mediation of the photographic apparatus.

To photograph a situation is also to manipulate it, and this occurs not only because the photographer controls—however intuitive this "controlling" may be—exposure times, filters, framing, point of view and post-production, but also, as a result of attunement, the incessant attempt to find the "privileged moments" in each still image. As an exercise between *directed attention* and *critical distance*, the gesture of photographing has affinities with the gesture of philosophizing, the former being a kind of phenomenology via imagetic means.[26]

Thus, in photography the question of gesture emerges on at least two levels: the gesture of photographing and photographed gestures. The two involve the possibility of capturing and transfiguring moods by means of *attuned gesture-images*. However, the immobilization of gestures raises questions that go beyond the mere attunement of

feelings and their expression. How, then, can one reconcile the attunement that is inherent to immobilized gestures with their discrete and independent quality? And what is the importance of all this for an aesthetic approach to urban photography that is attentive to a social and political dimension?

4. From atmospheres to Jeff Wall's *Mimic*

The first section started with the streets of Lisbon and explored the use of photographs in the film *Belarmino*, a foray that subsequently led us to Husserl's phenomenological approach and Flusser's philosophy of gestures. It is now time to return to the streets. The atmospheres of cities raise particular questions, and it is no coincidence that, focusing on the affective and pre-logical layers of our sensible relationship with the world, the aesthetics of atmospheres—which is not reducible to the theory of art—has been developing in an intimate connection with architecture and the study of the multisensory field of urban space.[27] From the perspective of photography, it is pertinent to return to the classic Eugène Atget and to how Walter Benjamin viewed his photographs of Paris (most of which did not include human figures). According to the latter, these were able

> to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere – indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography. [. . .] He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.[28]

This quote is not meant to resume the long discussion on the concept of aura in relation to the cult value of works of art. On the other hand, the relationship between the Benjaminian aura and the concept of atmosphere has already been widely observed, particularly in the sense that both presuppose, as Tonino Griffero puts it, "pre-sentiments, ineluctable and unintentional, that affectively and corporeally involve man from the outside, determining his emotional state—which is far from being under his control."[29] What is worth highlighting here is the atmospheric dimension of Atget's photographs, namely their capacity not only to capture a certain atmosphere but also to work with perceptual layers that allow one to look at and feel spaces differently. In this sense, the atmosphere of photographed cities functions as a dynamic medium that is inseparable from the modes and techniques of representing and transfiguring space. Emptiness can be one of these modes. Photography is thus a means of attunement in urban space, and also of studying such elusive but pervasive "things" as atmospheres. According to Griffero, this study should start from the "conviction that atmosphere, at least the prototypical one, lies not so much in the eye of the perceiver, but it is rather a relatively objective (intersubjective) feeling we encounter in the external space."[30]

Benjamin's notion of optical unconscious, developed through an analogy with the instinctual unconscious of psychoanalysis, also accounts for the possibility of accessing unforeseen perceptions of everyday gestures and atmospheres. Opening up an imagistic space informed by the unconscious, photographic and cinematographic techniques create a universe of study and aesthetic exploration of gestures:

> Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods in which we find ourselves [*den verschiedenen Verfassungen schwankt, in denen wir uns befinden*]. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object.[31]

The possibility of making gestures visible and analytically dissecting them alters the very understanding we have of them, as well as the atmosphere in which they are immersed—as Benjamin remarks, our access to this "other world" is affected by the variation of our own dispositions and moods. This has little to do with a search for the dramatic scenes that occur in urban space; rather, it concerns the use of the photographic gesture as a way of bringing to the surface the habits that are embedded in the defensive and reactive mechanisms of consciousness so characteristic of metropolitan living. It is in this sense that Eli Friedlander asserts that "we can *explore* and investigate in photography the everyday through the arrest of the habitual,"[32] an exploration that has been regarded, in general terms (not restricted to the notion of the optical unconscious), as one of the main achievements of contemporary art photography.[33]

This exploration can refer to the realm of social visibility, making characters stand out from the underworld, as in the film *Belarmino* or in Jacob Riis's *How the other half lives*, but it can also—or simultaneously—bring into play the social and intersubjective dimension of gestural and bodily layers that invoke other mechanisms and aesthetic constructions, as in Jeff Wall's *Mimic*. In *Mimic*—and indeed in other photographs by Wall—subjects seem to be completely absorbed in their daily activities: in apparently banal but remarkable events. Photography's capacity to give meaning to details, rescuing them from the flow of life, unfolds from and goes beyond what happens in painting. It is in this sense that *Mimic* can be said to dialogue with Gustave Caillebotte's impressionist painting *Rainy Day* (1876), as they share an interest in everyday life in the city. Still, the techniques used and the way they combine gestures and atmospheres point in different directions, and Friedlander rightly underscores the distinctive role played by "bright light":

> Caillebotte relies on the effect of the atmospheric mood created by the rainy day to bring out the unity of the impression of the city. The living environment portrayed impressionistically serves the sense of a flow of life (or as Benjamin puts it in his essay on Baudelaire, the sense of the crowd as a veil thrown over the city). This atmospheric unity is replaced in Wall's photograph by the bright light of a perfectly sunny day that exposes in crisp detail the presence of the people in the photograph.[34]

Mimic's photographic atmosphere helps to expose the details and thus sets the tone for a series of small gestures and expressions that reveal racial and social tensions: the bearded man shows hostility toward the Asian-looking man, and the whole image is thus invested with this tension. Several commentators on Wall's work—in particular Michael Fried[35]—have identified the threads that are woven throughout this piece. Firstly, it belongs to a period, in the 1980s, in which the Canadian artist devoted himself more deliberately to social issues (as a reinterpretation of Baudelaire's "painting of modern life"). Secondly, the photograph was staged and produced to re-enact a real-

life scene that Wall himself had observed. In this sense, it subverts and plays with the tradition and conventions of street photography. It was not the result of a photographer's walking through the streets with a small 35 mm camera, looking around for motifs to which he could react and capture. It did not result from a *decisive moment*, in Cartier-Bresson's sense. However, it presents the *best* and *most noticed* gesture—to echo Husserl—as a refined construction. In this play with the conventions of street photography, questions arise concerning the supposed naturalness and spontaneity of the photographed and how the photographer relates to subjects—things that are never linear in photography. One may add that *Mimic* reveals an *attuned construction*, achievable through the artificial gestures and technical means the artist had at his disposal.

Gestures performed in scenes of urban everyday life correspond to one of the main strands of Wall's work. Moreover, in a short text entitled "Gestus," he himself highlights certain aspects of human gesture that relate to what we have already seen. He positions his work in terms of a discussion on the representation of the body, relating it to the expressive gestures that constitute a kind of emblem, a form of manifestation that "knows itself to be appearance."[36] On the other hand, the gesture is also "a pose or action which projects its meaning as a conventionalized sign."[37] The mechanism of this projection is not made explicit, and the text moves towards another distinction: between baroque gestuality—and its theatrical dimension—and modern, mechanized and automated gestuality, linked to life in cities. From the point of view of ancient aesthetics, these mechanical and automatic movements would not really be gestures in the full sense, for they are smaller, often reactive, and hardly express anything. They are "microgestures"[38] that come from the bowels of modern society and are expressed in the individual body. But their smallness has a counterpoint: the existence of devices that allow them to be enlarged, better visualized and potentially analyzed (one can relate this to the optical unconscious).

There is a dimension of gesture here that is not easily reducible to a conventional side, although the latter is exactly what makes the gesture relevant to the public sphere, and thus its meaning can be the meaning of a body that expresses itself socially. Hagi Kenaan elaborates on the metaphysical relevance of this dimension as follows:

> Wall's conceptualization of the manner in which gesture "projects its meaning as a conventionalized sign" is already dependent on a certain understanding of a relational structure that is constitutive of human subjectivity: this is the relationship between the inner form or inner life of the subject – what Husserl, for example, terms "the subject's sphere of own-ness" – and the subject's social constitution, i.e., its appearance within horizons of sense that are always already public and general.[39]

In this context, one might recall the boxer's expression, described by Husserl as coming from *within*; that is, the aesthetic appearance in his action and suffering is the immobilization of his "inner life" (the stomachache raises other issues, as we have seen). Grounded or not in phenomenological terminology, this relational structure seems to add an interesting layer of complexity to Wall's work.

Michael Fried, on the other hand, puts less value on the political and social dimension of micro-gestures, emphasizing instead the question of anti-theatricality and absorption, a topic that runs through his art history books. In this sense, Fried ends up commenting on the work of Philip-Lorca diCorcia, a photographer who adds unique elements to his cast of anti-theatricality.[40] From diCorcia's earliest works, the use of spotlights and flashes to illuminate subjects has been a crucial procedure. In this sense, the series *Heads* extends a mechanism previously used in the series *New York*: as passers-by cross a certain point, they trigger an installed mechanism that activates a light beam and simultaneously takes the photograph. *Heads* is thus a mixture of composition and automatism, of manipulation and chance, lying somewhere between the reinvention of street photography and the exploration of conceptual elements: passers-by are displaced from the anonymous masses, focused and individualized, but awkwardly they maintain their self-absorption. In this sense, they are at the same time very close to Belarmino's photographs, but also almost at the antipodes, in the sense that Belarmino, even when he is absorbed, had been made part of the construction by the initial snap-shots. And this has significant aesthetic, political and social consequences.

As for Jeff Wall's characters, they are also part of a construction and play a role, conveying a sense of strangeness that is typical of his photographs. Furthermore, "if mimesis is the germ of art," in the case of *Mimic* it also becomes "a weapon of war,"[41] a way of confronting us with urban tensions and, as Friedlander adds, of bringing out "this violence at the threshold of the sense of our ordinary environment, that is without making of it a dramatic scene of overt aggression."[42] One doesn't need to see a fight to understand that subtle but ferocious skirmishes occur daily, on the most banal streets, and photographed micro-gestures convey "evidential power" to this.

In Wall's and diCorcia's work, gestures and atmospheres take on very different contours than those they assume in the tradition of street photography; with Wall and diCorcia, the boundary between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, the documental and the artificial, is sometimes difficult to draw. In any case, they take part in the study of expressivity and gestuality by photographic means, using photography, complex technical procedures, and aesthetic references that reveal the mutual and prolific cross-contamination of photography and contemporary art.

5. Last takes, last round

The first round focused on the role of photography in the film *Belarmino*, which led us to reflect not only on the representation of urban phenomena but also on the issue of expressions and gestures, as photographically explored in a boxing match. The second section delved into Husserl's thinking on image consciousness, his surprising reference to a "photograph" of a boxer, and the relevance of his phenomenological approach when it comes to defining the aesthetic properties of gesture-images. The third section considered the principles of Vilém Flusser's philosophy of gestures, focusing on the semantic field of attunement and its connection to photography, gestures, moods and affects. These concepts and

examples allow one to relate the question of gestures in photography—both the photographer's and the photographed subject's—to notions such as attunement and atmosphere, a recognition that is meant to complement or go beyond semiological, psychological and communicational approaches. At the same time, they are important for aesthetic and artistic experiences. In this sense, the fourth section explored certain relations between the city and photography and, in particular, showed how gestures that are simultaneously individual and intersubjective are part of the great heterogeneous and conflictual space of modern cities, where anonymity and individualism relate in complex ways to the self-absorptive trait that is of such interest to a certain way of viewing photography as art.

The various case studies and conceptual threads intertwined in the four sections reveal that, on the one hand, photography is undoubtedly an important medium for the study of gestures and atmospheres and that, on the other hand, when it comes to urban space this study often takes on a social and political dimension. This does not mean that all urban photography is bound to social and political goals in a straightforward manner, and the analyses developed here are not intended to argue that it should be. Nevertheless, the possibility of arresting and studying such fleeting and evanescent things as gestures and atmospheres is surely relevant to the complex social and political dimensions of photography and art. Against this background, Lopes's *Belarmino* and Wall's *Mimic* are exemplary as they ground their political meaning in the function of discovery, of revealing the hidden world of great cities. Belarmino is rescued from anonymity and redeemed in a portrait that does not obscure his strengths and weaknesses; the boxer's expressions and gestures, as well as the atmosphere surrounding him, are part of the construction of the character and his urban environment. *Mimic* is likewise an artistic construction that photographically stages physical, social and racial tensions—yet one that is not easily deciphered. When compared with these two cases, diCorcia's portraits of passers-by in *Heads* are powerful and eloquent in their depiction of social and physiognomic heterogeneity, but they ultimately have an appeasing effect that renders the series' political meaning ambiguous: captivating and enigmatic individuals are isolated from the crowd, but the construction of their appearance, nourished by their self-absorptive mood, seems to overshadow the tensions of metropolitan existence. Nevertheless, more than showing the truthfulness of images, i.e. the epistemological accuracy of the photographic reproduction of reality, these three cases highlight the intrinsic connection between the ongoing practice of photography and reality, revealing the former's paradoxical standing as both a way of making contact with reality and a means of transfiguring it. On different levels, their combination of *intensity and ambiguity of expression* makes us want to know more about *that* gesture, *that* person, the place where it all occurs—in other words, to understand what happens to individuals and their bodies in collective, shared, political spaces.

Each of these different approaches, whether closer to street photography or to conceptual art practices, deals in distinctive but concomitant ways with the human element and the permeability of everyday life, with gestures and atmospheres that allow us to better understand and feel cities, apart from being ways for photographers to fine-tune their relationship with spaces and others. As spectators, we

are given the opportunity to experience an aesthetic construction that can enhance our critical attitude towards the reality that surrounds us, but we are also given the chance to recognize ourselves in the modulation of life that lies behind all this and to make room for our own attunements.

Notes

1. Neves, *O Lugar dos Ricos*, 26.
2. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 3–8.
3. The director Fernando Lopes notes that it is also a film about a face, a boxing match and, ultimately, hand-to-hand combat between the director and the boxer, through the streets of a city they both know well. On this hand-to-hand dimension, see Neves, *O Lugar dos Ricos*, 17–18.
4. Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846," 129.
5. Ibid., 130.
6. Benjamin, "Paris, The Capital," 6.
7. Brough, "Translator's Introduction," XXXI.
8. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 21.
9. Ibid., 20–22.
10. Ibid., 23.
11. Ibid., 24–35.
12. See ibid., 168, where he mentions Kant's theory.
13. Ibid., 167–169 and also 459–465. Husserl's "Letter to Hofmannsthal" (January 12, 1907) refers to the naturalistic character of photography as an example of what he calls aesthetic impurity. In other words, while defending a parallel between the aesthetic attitude and phenomenology, between pure art and transcendental reduction, a parallel based on the suspension of the natural attitude toward existence, Husserl glues photography to the impossibility of a full suspension of the natural attitude. Independently of the nature of this aesthetic purity (which seems to have affinities with the disinterestedness of Kantian pure aesthetic judgment), it is symptomatic that photography presents additional difficulties, irresolvable in the strict framework presented in this letter and in the other texts that deal with aesthetic consciousness: photography disrupts the linear division between consciousness of the object (relative to the existence of the represented object) and aesthetic consciousness (relative to the modes of appearing).
14. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 169. I am keeping John B. Brough's translation of *Ringkämpfer* as "pugilist," although it could also be translated as "wrestler" or "fighter" (literally: one who fights in a ring).
15. It is worth mentioning that this text was probably written in 1906, when the photosensitivity of photographic materials allowed for the freezing of fast movements. Chronophotography and the first studies of movement by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge had been around for approximately thirty years by then. We may speculate about the impact of these technological and perceptive achievements on conceptual approaches such as Husserl's. Furthermore, his example of the photographed boxer is not random. While he resorts several times to photography to account for the specificities of his generic description of image consciousness, in this case the photographic example opens more complex and perhaps more interesting theoretical paths for understanding the expressive power (and ambiguity) of photography itself, paths that, however, seem to go beyond the field of his phenomenological descriptions. Elsewhere (Conceição, "Descrever fotografias"), I have tried to show the singular role of photography in Husserl's descriptions and how the former's privileged relationship with reality complexifies a pure distinction between image consciousness and perceptive consciousness. For thorough discussions of this topic, see also Brough, "The Curious Image"; and Rozzoni, "Cinema Consciousness."

16. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness*, 169 (my italics).
17. Rozzoni, *Nell'immagine*, 60.
18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 240e (§ 360).
19. Ibid., 152e (§ 536).
20. Friedlander, "The Photographic Gesture," 48.
21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 106. Comparing this "evidential power" (underlying the documentary and testimonial character of photography) with the phenomenological understanding of the image as "an object-as-nothing," Barthes adds: "Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it." Ibid., 115. On the one hand, as Barthes puts it, this has a hallucinatory effect; on the other hand, photographed gestures confront us with the *reality* of these gestures, a reality that is further complexified in social environments such as cities.
22. I am following Nancy Ann Roth's translation, although I think that *Gestimmtheit* is more appropriately translated as "attunement." In a note to her translation, the use of "affect" is explained, but her thoughts on "attunement" seem quite convincing as well: "the word attunement, an equivalent that has appeared in other translations of German philosophy, has the distinct advantage of emphasizing the idea of intention, the phenomenological understanding that consciousness is always consciousness of something, toward which that consciousness is directed, or 'attuned.'" Roth, "Translator's Notes," 177–178.
23. Flusser, *Gestures*, 1–5.
24. See Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 134–140 (§ 29).
25. Flusser, *Gestures*, 6 (translation modified).
26. Flusser, *Gestures*, 76.
27. See Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 123–165. For a wide-ranging approach to the relationship between atmosphere and aesthetics, see Griffero and Tedeschini, *Atmosphere and Aesthetics*.
28. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 518.
29. Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 75–78. See also Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 14–15.
30. Griffero, *Atmospheres*, 143.
31. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 266 (translation modified).
32. Friedlander, "The Photographic Gesture," 51.
33. See Fried, *Why Photography Matters*.
34. Friedlander, "The Photographic Gesture," 54.
35. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art*, 234–259.
36. Wall, "Gestus," 85.
37. Ibid.
38. Wall, "Typology, Luminescence, Freedom," 197.
39. Kenaan, "A Picture's Gesture," 58–59.
40. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art*, 249–259.
41. See note 38 above.
42. Friedlander, "The Photographic Gesture," 55.

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