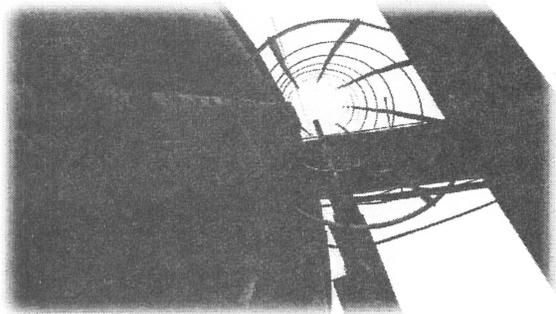


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Bodies in Motion: Reflections on a
Gesticular Fashion

Steven DeCaroli

Let us understand that the corporeal mime wants a bare stage, nude actors, and no variation in lighting. For once, the theater is no longer a cross-roads of all the arts, but the triumph of one art only: that of the body in motion.

Jean Dorcy,
speaking about Etienne Decroux

Nearly two centuries before five women¹ took the podium in Boston to castigate “the Juggernaut of fashion” for the crushing sacrifice it demanded of its corseted subjects (“breathless from compression and weary of the buffeting of thick folds”), and prior also to the opening of the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* where Jacques Copeau, tutor of the great twentieth-century mimes Decroux, Barrault and Marceau, dissolved the proscenium and eliminated the auditorium’s footlights, Louis XIV (1643-1715) rose to the throne in France. The reign of the Sun King was the beginning of the great age of harlequins, a period of dazzling exuberance in dress and adornment. Ribbons, curls, flounces and feathers garnished the bodies of the court, but alongside this display of sartorial acumen, which would make the fashion and manners of France the model for the rest of Europe, there was also the enforcement of sumptuary laws whose purpose it was to both index and prescribe the modes of dress one was permitted to wear according to one’s social standing. Fashion had become overtly political at a time when, due in part to the spoils of sea voyages washing up on the

southern coast line, holds pregnant with silks, spices and tropical timber, the fashion industry acquired the raw materials necessary to flex its aesthetic muscles. The sea-going vehicle, its extension of movement and perception, precipitated both a minor renaissance in fashion design and a simultaneous restriction of access to those designs for commoners who could, for the time being at least, be no more than spectators huddled in observance before a theater of accumulation. Their political cinching would, of course, erupt at the end of the century in a revolution predicated on “costumes of revolt”² led by the *sans-culottes* bedecked in loose trousers, *carmagnole* jackets, and brandishing above their brow the bold-red phrygian “cap of liberty.” But for the moment their political means were silenced, squelched by codes of dress. And it was this same King who, while he greatly enjoyed the antics of the Italian theater troupes, the *Commedia dell’Arte*, would eventually silence them. Not unlike the plebeian masses who made their censured attire their battle cry, these foreign performers would find on the streets of France the ingredients of a new art.

Giuseppe Domenico Biancolelli, born in Bologna in 1640, traveled to France in league with a company of actors under the direction of Cardinal Mazarin and would become the first of the Harlequins to achieve a certain rank and fame within the court at Versailles, where he performed in a throaty voice for Louis XIV, who evidently appreciated the company of a quick-witted performer. While the King certainly encouraged and even patronized the dramatic arts, by the end of the century this generous tide would ebb, and in 1697 Louis would go so far as to expel the Italian players from Paris’s city limits because, we are told, they mocked his lady, Madame de Maintenon.³ The rivalry between the Italian actors and the indigenous royal theaters—the *Comédie-Française* and the *Opéra*—had by this time grown to such a fervid pitch that the Italian troupes, already exiled to the Left Bank, were officially handicapped by the authorities who sanctioned performances only on the condition that the actors not speak. For two hushed decades following the enforcement of this arcane prohibition

of the voice, Italian actors as well as itinerant performers playing at fairgrounds throughout France had to resort to unconventional methods of communication to draw their audience. Amidst this bricolage of techniques, which included the use of inscribed placards, couplets sung by choruses in the audience, and symbolic gesturing, silent pantomime was born. And even after the ban was lifted and the actors were welcomed back into Paris, pantomime remained an independent genre which, along with a menagerie of other side-show performances—animal acts, marionettes, jugglers, acrobats—congregated along the Boulevard du Temple, then on the fringes of Paris, to create a carnival atmosphere which flourished as a site of popular entertainment.

The France of Louis XIV was for the common person as well as the popular performer a period of restriction, both of clothing and of voice, and while these are perhaps not directly related episodes, their identical historical coordinates give rise to the possible relationship between the two, especially when one considers their not merely serendipitous convergence at the beginning of our own century (women’s dress reform and the renewed interest in mime and its personalities—particularly the figure of Pierrot—in both the dramatic and plastic arts), and the influence issues of fashion and theatrical gesture share in our fundamentally ocular age. If, as Elizabeth Wilson claims, “the love affair of black and white photography with fashion is the modernist sensibility,”⁴ or if at least the camera as a means of capturing and dissemination the fashionable image went a long way toward making people more self-conscious and sophisticated about their personal appearance, then it will also be conceded that, insofar as the photographic image evolved towards the cinematic, motion itself became a locus of both fascination and aesthetic concern.

In his rarely invoked 1887 work, *The Aesthetics of Movement*,⁵ the French philosopher Paul Souriau expounds at some length on the particular philosophical issues concerning the beauty of bodies in motion. Consideration of both the synchronized expenditure of the machine and the choreographed movements of dance or gym-

nastics finds Souriau's argument locked between the horns of efficiency and grace, economy and elegance. And similarly, while the debate surrounding dress reform and the loosening of corset lacings was, on the one hand, discussed in terms of obstructed movement and impracticality, another significant branch of the argument traced a fundamentally aesthetic path. In the fifth lecture addressed to an audience in the spring of 1874, which brought to a close a Boston conference on the issues of women's dress reform and the health risks of Edwardian fashion, Abba Goold Woolson remarked:

Probably no obstacle stands more in the way of a sensible dress-reform, such as health and comfort imperatively demand, than the prevailing notion that any such change must necessarily be hideous, and an offense to the eyes. As if Beauty refused to ally herself with Health and Convenience; and as if they were not the trinity in dress which ought never be separated! Indeed, we should pray for a radical change in our attire, if for no other reason than because we believe in beauty.⁶

In Woolson's statement we find the final argument for dress reform premised on a natural aesthetic. This trinity of dress is resisted and found repulsive to those who for centuries have known nothing but the bodice with its rigorous and artificial division of the body. Shoulder hung garments, the sort made infamous by the shrewd exhibitionism of Isadora Duncan in the early 1900s, which threatened to restore an anatomical unity to the bifurcated torso, were received as indecent. And while this resistance was certainly a reaction to the look of the body in new and unfamiliar skin, it is my contention that, in tandem with the threatening unfamiliarity that accompanied this new look, this change in look also marked a change in motion which holds the pertinent story of the modern age. By unleashing the body from

its tortured wrap, the figure—particularly the female figure—gained a new flexibility and speed, as if the radical technological advancements of nineteenth century transportation reached their apotheosis in the rediscovery of human movement itself.

For Woolson motion is a natural habit, and any obstruction of this human capacity is, in her eyes, tantamount to an obstruction of god's own handiwork: "He made [the body] as he wished it to be; capable, by wonderful mechanisms, of swift and easy motion . . . so varied in its capacities, so lightly moved from place to place, that in its perfect state the soul which inhabits it is unconscious of its existence, and knows it only as a source of help and pleasure."⁷ Thus, like the soul that wears the flesh as an effortless, wholly merged, appendage, the new mode of dress must likewise accommodate the wearer's particular comportment—acting not as decorative shackles for the mannequin of the body, but rather as a flexible medium for the mobile subject. In fact, during these early decades of the twentieth century the very notion of a solid, gravity-bound body will itself be challenged by experiments in aviation, slow motion cinematography, and even by the architecture of the skyscraper, veined with elevator shafts and shingled with panoramic glass. Dress reform and the change in costume it precipitated was, then, both a result of the modern fascination with movement and, reciprocally, a catalyst for developing that fascination into a central, if not *the* central, aesthetic issue of the early twentieth century. And as we shall see, at its limit the visual will begin to erode the corporeal ontology of the body itself: motion remains and, as in Gordon Craig's elimination of the actor, or in the scalloped waves of Giacomo Balla's *Abstract Speed*, the body becomes redundant.

Two years prior to the Boston conference on dress reform Eadweard Muybridge, an English photographer living in Palo Alto, California, was commissioned by former governor Leland Stanford to devise a photographic system whereby he could determine whether or not the four hooves of his racehorse left the ground simultaneously. The success of this project led to a collaboration between the two men

which nearly six years later would result in an application for a patent submitted by Muybridge under the title "Method and Apparatus for Photographing Objects in Motion."⁸ His invention involved a battery of 12 to 24 cameras whose shutters were triggered as the horse tripped a sequence of threads strung across the track, each camera capturing with quite remarkable crispness and clarity a split second in the horse's trot (fig. 1).

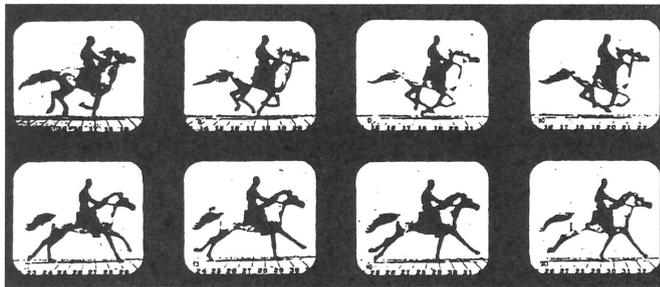


fig. 1: E. Muybridge, *Mahomet Running*, in R. B. Haas, *Muybridge: Man in Motion*, 141. Plate XIII from J. D. B. Stillman, *The Horse in Motion* (Boston, 1881), based almost entirely on Muybridge's work, but with Muybridge's name omitted from the title page.

Viewed individually these "portraits" are certainly remarkable, but it is not until they are laid side by side that one is struck by that uncanny addition that forces the whole to supersede the sum of its parts. There is something mechanical about these still frames, something electric, charged, that transports one's gaze across the page in an accelerated attempt to capture something which had yet to be completely tamed. The temporal axis across which the photos extend and find their unique brilliance was in Muybridge's time an unfamiliar vector. Here for the first time movement itself and the duration it occupies are given permanence. For the first time we have the recording of gestures as gestures, that is, as a series of temporally extended postures—turn of the hand, flex of the neck—which could now be

studied, discussed and ultimately, under names ranging from Taylorism to Meyerhold's Biomechanics, improved. Once speed, the opaque veil that hide the details of human movement, was made transparent it revealed to artist and engineer alike not only new facts about the body in motion, but exposed them to an entirely new *mode* of perception.

So it is perhaps no coincidence that the fashion industry took on its contemporary form (the rapid recycling of designs, the acceleration of publicity, a cyclonic ubiquity) at the same time the cinematic offspring of Muybridge's experiments—so enchanted by the temporal—were becoming a fashion in their own right. The recording of motion and the new perceptual perspective it established reorganized the nature of fashion around the logic of movement and the perpetual change that chronophotography made visible. Our eagerness to perceive malleable forms expressed itself in the dynamic bearing of the fashionable subject as well as in an intensification of fashion's own historical consciousness which, though certainly not new, seems to have reached a new height with the publication of glossy fashion periodicals, *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, which track subtle alterations in hem lines and color schemes on a monthly basis. And while these magazines rely on still photography and their descriptions to make fashion seductive, within their pages many of the predecessors and innovators of non-traditional, kinetic photography—Baron Adolf De Meyer and Edward Steichen, and later Martin Munkacsy and Herman Landshoff—first explored the possibility of describing movement in a static medium and were able to share this work with an audience of thousands who quickly became literate in the coded visual vocabulary of represented movement.

But, as we have seen, it was on a horse track in northern California that movement was first released from its invisible state and exposed as a capturable body. The snapping of tightly strung thread, not unlike the clipping of corset laces, released a new vector of movement—the forthright words of Abbe Woolson and the photographic cells of Muybridge share at least this much in common.

Early in *The Aesthetics of Movement*, Paul Souriau discloses to his readers the underlying premise on which his study rests: "It is unquestionable that under certain conditions the sight of bodies in motion gives us aesthetic pleasure; and we are not content with enjoying this kind of spectacle when nature chances to provide it; we also seek its display; we try to bring harmony and rhythm into our own movements."⁹ In the tenth chapter, Souriau examines the concept of grace, which he associates with an economy of force. However, this economy, the judicious use of strength and the elimination of superfluous movements, is not enough on which to establish an aesthetic principle. As Souriau explains, a dancer who must cross the stage will do so with elegance, "with good elevation and stretched legs," but this carriage will cost her more energy than if she were to saunter across in a leisurely manner.¹⁰ Thus it is not the ease of movement which Souriau defines as graceful, for this merely employs movement like an efficient machine, but rather it is the "impression of physical ease" that maintains the distinction. And it is this "impression" of motion and its tailoring that concerns us here, because like fabric its efficacy exceeds mechanical utility. That is to say, in the same way fine clothing provides us with more than bodily warmth, graceful movement exceeds what Etienne Decroux has disparagingly referred to as the "golden calf named Result."¹¹ Like fashion, grace in movement involves the artifice of impression, of ease, of spontaneity in gesture, and it is precisely at this point that we enter the acutely fashioned, gesticular space of pantomime.

Following his preliminary remarks on the characteristics of grace, Souriau proceeds to itemize for his readers six conditions required by movement to give us the impression of physical ease.¹² Among these conditions is the "absence of noise" about which Souriau writes, "in our minds, noise and friction are so associated with one another that the working of the machine which makes noise will seem painful, as if our ears perceive immediately the effort of its motion."¹³ Like the creaking of knees or the shriek of an unoiled axle, noise

betrays the exertion of force, interrupting the glide of motion which, in silence, seems to arise of its own accord. Exterior noises that accompany a movement must, therefore, be taken into account when evaluating effort and, while Souriau admits that in certain cases sounds are useful in marking a rhythmic beat or in giving the overall impression of power—stepping in time, the tambourine, the rage of a waterfall—"they are always and directly incompatible with grace."¹⁴ Considering the historical period during which this thesis was forwarded, and considering also the widespread preoccupation with silent movement not only in Muybridge's photos, but also in Lumière's work with silent film, both the timing and requirements of this new aesthetic sync tightly with the art of pantomime, which had recently acquired a great deal of renewed interest and whose popularity would be maintained through the work of cinematic mimes such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Thus our first encounters with the representation of human motion, isolated as if by dissection from audible cues as well as from color, gave overriding importance to action at the expense of voice. Echoing this stress on the kinetic, Stanislavski writes, "my theory is to take away the text from the actor and make him work only on actions,"¹⁵ and Gordon Craig, casting the same shadow, once said that "all great drama moves in silence."¹⁶ Though these statements are to a certain degree hyperbolic, their tendency is symptomatic of an era that witnessed the bewitching logic of the mirror erupt into downtown movie houses where the looking glass took on a life of its own. The opportunity to witness our own movement, which was once only afforded to us by the private bedroom mirror, that quintessential tool of the fashionable citizen, had become a pastime for the cinema-drawn public who learned from a common screen the fashionable attitudes of their modern age.

In the late nineteenth century gymnastics and sports swept across Europe, ostensibly in an effort to keep the population fit for war and to act as an antidote to the physically debilitating work of the factory. But as Etienne Decroux, a student of Jacques Copeau at the *École*

du Vieux Colombier, explains in a short essay, "Is the Advent of the Mime Timely?," sport evolved in direct response to a need to validate the human body: "Sports came into a world where the human body was outdated, where man had to remain seated to operate various push-buttons without pressing down on them too hard."¹⁷ Sports, then, arrived at the moment the mechanics of the body were becoming obsolete, dwarfed by the grinding stamina of the engine, and thus served to legitimate human motion which paled in comparison to the efficient motion of the machine. But as we have seen in the work of Paul Souriau, efficiency is only one of the yard-sticks by which to evaluate movement. The evaluative space cleared by aesthetic theories such as Souriau's allowed the human body to offset the humiliation it confronted in the factory by shifting the standards of value, the criterion for our judgments of kinetic taste, from an emphasis on the result of action to the intricate process of action itself. In short, the means had superseded the ends. In this regard Decroux writes:

To displace heavier and heavier objects, to move them faster and faster, and to throw things in the right direction, these are some of the results sought in the realm of sports. Now compared to the capabilities of animals or specialized machines, man's possibilities are absurdly limited. If, in this competition, only results counted, we would not bet on man: sports would be a failure, even before the starting signal. But the means are the important element in this field, and this makes all the difference.¹⁸

Goals scored or the runs batted in are of only secondary importance, superficial in nature to the real project: a defensive celebration of human movement marshaled against the overwhelming successes of

machine age production. Out performed by steam-driven labor and relegated to chores that effectively severed movement from volition, the nineteenth century body faced a crisis of value. In response to this crisis a new aesthetic materialized, and not unlike Kant's 1790 treatise on "disinterested pleasure," which established the modern concept of autonomous art at precisely the moment the Industrial Revolution was promoting mass production across Europe, Souriau's neo-Kantian writing, together with photographic studies of motion, negotiated a new system of legitimation to justify the value of the human body under new and pressing historical conditions.¹⁹

Confronted with obsolescence the body risked exposure: on the tennis court Suzanne Lenglen stunned Wimbledon when in 1920 she sprang onto the lawn with a loose pleated skirt and sleeveless blouse; on the stage Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis, and Isadora Duncan performed in draped and billowed garments reminding their audience how seductive the undulations of the body could be when it was not bridled by the corset; and in mime, Decroux took what seemed a malicious pleasure in countering objections to his near nude appearances by responding peevishly, "One does not go naked because one is handsome, but rather to become it."

In *Sport* Decroux performs barefoot, his tendons narrowing beneath the hint of an iron ball whose cool, pitted surface we can all but feel in his cocked palm (fig. 2). Clothed in a loin cloth, his face expunged by thin cotton, he is an Olympian as implausible as those rendered in marble, but yet by meticulously attending to each motion Decroux shows us the details we miss in the fever of real competition. Here we are no longer concerned with where the shot-put lands but are rather captivated by the technique used to catapult that ephemeral ball, because despite logic, the ball does indeed land; we feel it hit the ground as surely as we strain against its gravity, setting against it what Decroux speaks of as our "force of elevation." Like a technician in his editing room, or hearkening back to his days as a butcher skillfully carving around the bone, Decroux deftly removes objects, his perfor-

mative blade dividing the ball from its weight, leaving only the sutured drag of gravity in its place.



fig. 2: *Sport*, E. Decroux. Photo by E.-B. Weill (1948); cited in T. Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime*, plate 8.

By May of 1924, when Jacques Copeau decided to close the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* in order to devote his time more fully to teaching, Etienne Decroux had already been his student for a year. A gifted speaker, Decroux entered Copeau's school with the intention of attending diction classes. Dressed in the suit, hat, and large bow tie of the early militant socialists, and never shy about expounding on his political views ("Above art there is politics," he would announce, "above art there is politics . . ."), other students referred to him as "the orator." But as irony would have it, Decroux the orator would become an "apostle of silence," largely responsible for the autonomous status of modern mime. In the 1920s Decroux and his contemporaries rebelled against nineteenth century paradigms and middle class complacency.

Alfred Jarry's 1896 performance of *Ubu Roi*, its opening line, the single word "*Merdre*," was but the first in a decades-long procession of performances that challenged the traditional concept of theater. Unlike Copeau before him who clung to a more holistic vision of the theater which included text, movement and scenery, Decroux disassembled the theater into its component parts, separating speech from movement. From this split and the pedagogical exercises which followed, the techniques of modern mime were developed, in the wake of which he would be accused of deriding drama by attempting to separate mime from it. But as Decroux maintained, "art is all the richer by being poor in means,"²⁰ that is to say, for an art to be genuine the idea of one thing must be given by another thing, a method which he felt to be sorely lacking in explicit narratives of mainstream drama. "Orthodox theater," Decroux wrote in a letter to Gaston Baty, "scarcely being an art itself [since it 'suggests the thing by the thing itself'] has little chance of becoming complete."²¹ Genuine art, on the other hand, maintained by a paradox, is complete only insofar as it remains partial. Out of this principle evolved what would become known as "corporeal mime" about which Jean Dorcy, a student of Decroux's, wrote in a Paris newspaper article:

With corporeal mime, we no longer read known forms, we decode, reassemble, and appreciate according to our knowledge and our emotional state: the passive observer becomes active. Could one dream of a more fecund meeting of actor and audience?²²

For Decroux, mime was never to be simply a guessing game, a theatrical game of charades; on the contrary, mime was to proceed by analogy and metaphor, not replacing words with gesture, but giving gesture a stage of its own. In short, mime was no longer a matter of substitution, gestures no longer simply replaced words, and in this

corporeal mime marked its historical distance from the Harlequins of Paris whose movements were indeed surrogates for forbidden words.

Along with the concentration of movement, “counterbalance” was an integral part of corporeal mime and was employed in works throughout Decroux’s corpus, including the performance *Sport*. The technique of counterbalance sought to mold the pull of gravity, the “permanent symbol of our final collapse,”²³ and treat it as raw material. It was an exercise by which muscular reaction was conditioned to compensate, like the sportsman or laborer, for increased resistance to movement and involved the careful analysis of what the body did to displace objects of varying weight. For instance, in order to re-establish the balance broken by the weight of a pail of water, the idle arm extends and contracts acting as a counter-lever to this added load. If we physically eliminate this pail but wish to create the illusion that it is still there, the muscular reaction of the idle arm must not only be maintained, but must in fact be accentuated. These studies of reflex and balance, if we compare them to Marey’s sequential photos of women lifting urns or men heaving stones (fig. 3), are telling, not only because of the obsession with movement they share, but perhaps more importantly because of the differences between them.

The image of Decroux in *Sport* is magically stylized; he is at once nature and myth, the unaided athlete and Atlas shouldering the globe. In contrast to the man in Marey’s sequence, Decroux as sportsman has limited his display of visible effort to a degree of taughtness without extending over into strain. In frame number three of Marey’s sequence, the frame which seem to correspond best with Decroux pose, we see the hirsute gentleman grimace under the weight of his stone. His effort is vigorous but fails to register as graceful because, as Souriau writes, “among gymnasts and acrobats: those who turn red in the face with their effort will never give an impression of perfect ease.”²⁴ In Decroux’s case, of course, we see nothing of his facial expression. His face is concealed with white cloth and like the ceramic mask or the pancaked skin of the circus clown, his countenance

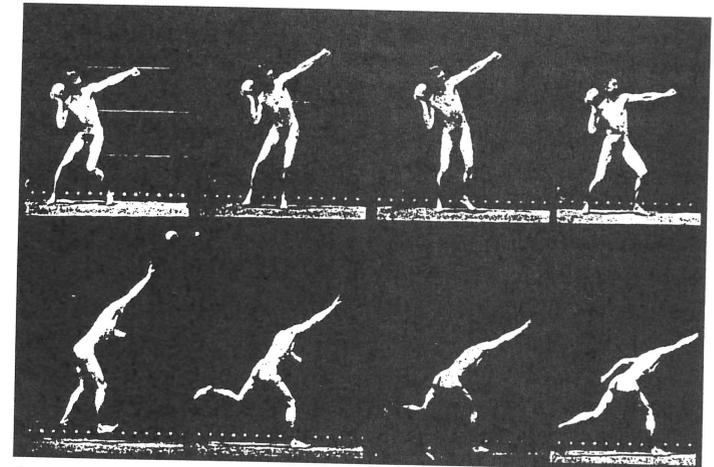


fig. 3: *Man Throwing a Stone*, E. J. Marey; cited in P. Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 24.

reveals no strain. About the whitened faces of clowns, Souriau tells us, that even “during the most incredible feats of nimbleness, the grotesque masks stay impassive, as if unaware of what the rest of their individual does.”²⁵ Remembering back to an afternoon when he visited the circus during a rehearsal performance, Souriau recalls that the clowns who had not bothered to apply their make-up left him “completely disillusioned,” their fantastic, rubbery antics tarnished by the sight of sweating brows. And so while it has been said that fashion is a permanent blush, a rouge generously applied to the skin of modern life, it is perhaps also, and in this regard, a strategy for denying the dress rehearsal. Like the lofty eyebrows of Marcel Marceau’s *Bip*, fashion courageously fends off the fatigue of performance, making our movements graceful, not by easing them, but by making them appear so. Body caught in the arch of a graceful tension, his left arm expressing the luxury of artifice that registers the impression of ease, Decroux’s athlete toys not only with the purely specular, but also with our sense of touch, our muscular empathy that locks our joints and pulls at our limbs when we observe movement and the gravity it navigates.

The fashionable body of the twentieth century is fundamentally a body in motion, and insofar as we perceive the aesthetic effect of the fashionable subject we do so not only by sight, but by sight conjoined with touch. "Touch," Jean-Louis Barrault writes, "is the 'performative' sense. It allows us to 'see' the other side of things, brings us into contact with the unknown, makes us glimpse the invisible,"²⁶ and, like Marey whose early work as a physiologist began with the invention of the polygraph which, by touching the skin, could spy on the sequestered rhythms of the heart and lungs, the performance of fashion is specular only insofar as it is also tactile. Thus the artifice of the mime—its crafting of gesture to the point that our muscular empathy overrides the logic of our sight, (above all we feel the weight in Decroux's hand, we do not see it)—is kin to the artifice of fashion which, particularly in our century, produces less a postured "look" than a dynamic "feel."

In tandem with Muybridge in America, Marey conducted one of the first thorough modern studies of human and animal locomotion. In 1870 Marey put aside his attempts to externalize the hidden movements of internal organs and concentrated on the illusive and equally opaque external behavior of bodies in motion. The flight of birds, the swimming of fish and, of course, the trot of horses, came under his camera's lens. Of particular interest to us here are the techniques Marey developed to isolate the movement of the human body and, not unlike the mime's separation of the corporeal object from its gravity, Marey sought to pry the body itself away from its locomotion, reducing the mass of the human figure to a series of geometric lines (fig. 4). Against a jet black background Marey photographed his subjects, but in order to accentuate their movement and track more accurately the subtle tendencies in their behavior Marey outfitted them in a dark body suit whose limbs were lined with strips of reflective cord. Cloaked in these new garments Marey could isolate any part of the body he wished to analyze and effectively erase the remainder, dissolving it into the dark background (fig. 5). The result of such procedures

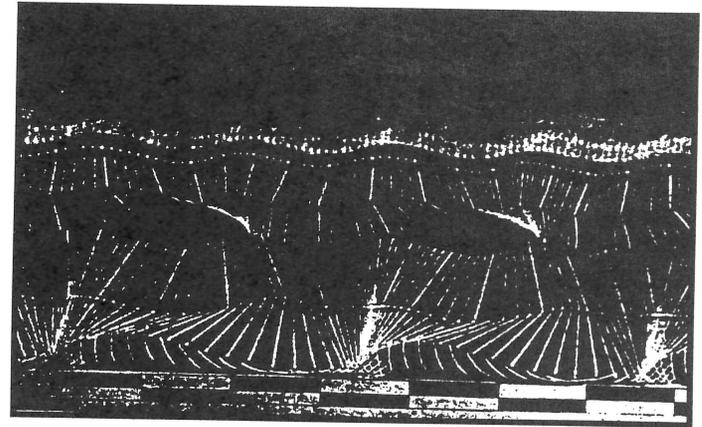


fig. 4: *Joinville Solider Walking*; cited in Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992) 84. From the archives of the Collège de France.

was stunning. The once quotidian tasks of lifting a box, climbing stairs, or even walking, blossomed into the delicate geometry of oscillating lines. The body of Georges Demeny, Marey's long time assistant, vanished into the shadows but as it did motion itself materialized on the small stage in the yard of Physiological Station, Marey's laboratory.



fig. 4: *Geometric chronophotography suit*; cited in Braun, *Picturing Time*, 83. Album A, plate 12, Musée Marey, Beaune.

These experiments and the images they generated had an indisputable effect on the art trends of the early twentieth century. Futurism in particular would find in Marey's photography—both his geometric chronophotography and his blurred images—the fundamental tools of kinetism as well as an implicit rejection of still photography and inert representation whose realism was ingenuously motionless.

Reduced in Marey's work to a series of lines, movement entered an era not only of scientific scrutiny, but also of aesthetic adjustment. The uncanny affinity the players in Decroux's mime performance *L'Usine* (fig. 6)—itself a critical response to the efficient convergence man and machine—have with the hooded assistants of Marey's experiments highlights the complex tapestry of connections that underlies the study of human movement. "Form in our art," Marcel Marceau once wrote, speaking equally cogent about mime as about Marey's science, "is but the architecture of gestures and the happy combination of lines."²⁷ As the limb strung ribbons of white cloth attest,

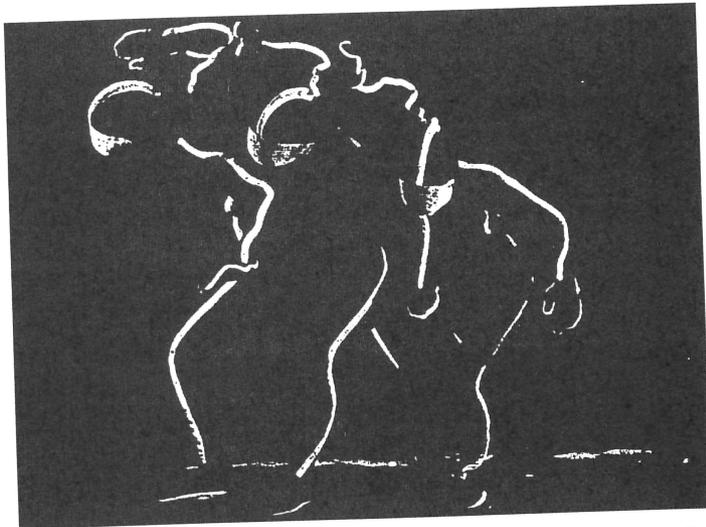


fig. 6: *L'Usine*, E. Decroux; photographed by E.-B. Weill (1946); cited in Marco De Marinis, *Mimo e mimi* (Frenze-Milano: La casa Usher, 1980) 105.

motion without scenery, without words, without bodies is fully capable of grace and a fashionable radiance. Indeed, Decroux seem almost to quote Marey when, in berating the obstruction caused by furniture and scenery, he writes, "If the scenery is made of lines arranged in a

certain manner, the actor placed before it, like an additional line, is visible, but it is hard to tell exactly where he starts and where he ends."²⁸ And like scenery, costume too is viewed as an obstruction to the real value of the performer who, as naked as moral etiquette will allow, sheds as much as is possible to reveal unadulterated motion. "Costume is a portable scenery," we are told, and like the shell of a turtle, internalizes movement. "The animal inside may be feline. Who will ever know? His action is all within."²⁹

But in both the case of Decroux and Marey it is, in fact, ultimately the dressing up of the body, robed in black and white, that gives us the best representation of movement.³⁰ Initially garments were peeled back to expose the movement they hide, but before long the body was clad in new threads, and this precisely to reveal more forcefully the motion of the limbs which carried them, as well, it must be added, to erase the body all the more completely.

In 1933 Martin Munkacsi, a Hungarian sports photographer, replaced Baron de Mayer as the chief fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*. Carmel Snow, herself recently appointed to the position of fashion editor, set out to revitalize the magazine, and it was her decision to employ Munkacsi, as well as to install the Russian graphics designer Alexey Brodovitch as her art director, that would soon effect a shocking and revolutionary change in the way fashion photographs were taken. Munkacsi's work would leap far beyond the posed and static style of those who preceded him by conveying in his photos a blur of motion and natural informality that complimented the new lines of women's sportswear being introduced by designers like Gabrielle Chanel. Recalling the photo shoot that would result in Munkacsi's famous early image of Lucile Brokaw running across the sand at Piping Rock beach (fig. 7), Carmel Snow writes:

The day was cold, unpleasant and dull—not at all auspicious. . . .It seemed that what Munkacsi wanted was for the model to run

toward him. Such a “pose” had never been attempted before for fashion. . . but Lucile was certainly game, and so was I. The resulting picture, of a typical American girl in action, with her cape billowing out behind her, made photographic history.³¹



fig. 7:
Untitled, from
*Harper's
Bazaar*, (Dec.
1934), M.
Munkacsi;
cited in Nancy
Hall-Duncan,
*The History of
Fashion
Photography*
(New York:
Alpine, 1979)
70.

This photo of a “girl in action” is in many ways the outcome of an extended fascination with movement which over the course of several decades was transformed from a method of measuring human locomotion, into not only a technique of fashion photography, but directly into a component of fashion itself. Herman Landshoff, who set out to generate in his fashion shots the same vivid and rushing impressions that Alexey Brodovitch had captured in his book *Ballet*, produced for *Jr. Bazaar* the first blurred background fashion photos (fig. 8). Like the view from a car window, the rushing background registers

as a metaphor for motion, but more than this, marks the perceptual readjustment of a society besieged by movement and the incorporation of that adjustment into the codes of fashion. Speed and motion become explicitly wearable.

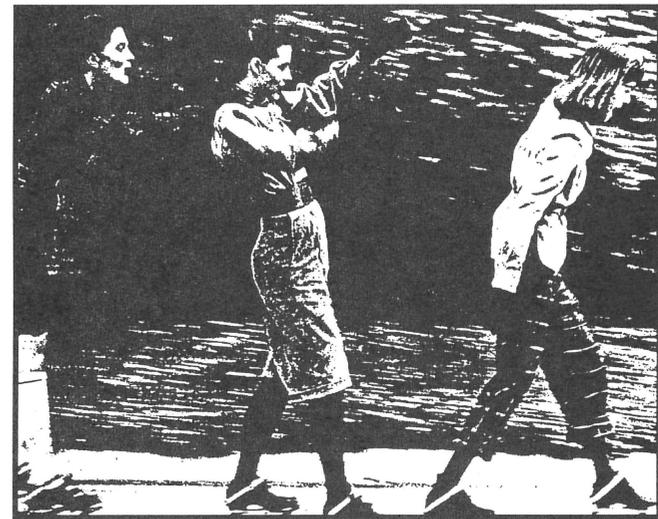


fig. 8: Untitled, from *Junior Bazaar*; cited in N. Hall-Duncan, 80. Neuberger Museum, SUNY-Purchase.

In “Bip et le Papillon,” Marceau’s Bip chases a butterfly and captures it, only to eventually set it free again. In the performance Marceau’s amazing hands form the butterfly and its palpitating wings. Riveted to the delicate creature we watch as it is released, and as it separates from Marceau’s body, as impossible as a moth from its cocoon, we travel with it. Marceau’s butterfly is neither Marceau or a butterfly, but rather a graceful gesture turned costume which we as audience help give flight. We work against gravity, focusing on the insect’s possible destinations, while Marceau and even Bip remain earth drawn and heavy. In Marey the same results transpire when in the very process of examining the minute vicissitudes of gesture we lose the

body to a flutter of wings, the soaring rhythm of lines. In fashion photos, in Brodovitch's *Ballet*, in Landshoff and Munkacsi, it is fashion in motion, and more importantly fashion as motion, that we encounter and desire to wrap ourselves in. But, of course, insofar as fashion is a measure of social climates and a marker of historical change, fashion has always been a matter of motion. And it is perhaps here that fashion is related to that silent urge that motivates history, resists stasis, and dreads the stuck inertia of the passé, and in this, and perhaps only to a measured degree, fashion rides the swells of its own history, "the condensed time of a hand passing in front of a face."

NOTES

¹ These five women were: Mary J. Safford-Blake, M.D., Caroline E. Hastings, M.D., Mercy B. Jackson, M.D., Arvilla B. Haynes, M.D. and Abba Goold Woolson. Together they held a lecture conference on issues of dress reform the proceedings of which were subsequently published under the title, *Dress-Reform: A Series of Lectures Delivered in Boston on Dress as it Affects the Health of Women*, ed. Abba Goold Woolson (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874). It has more recently been republished in full as a part of the series *Women in America: From Colonial Times to the 20th Century*, ed. Leon Stein and Annette K. Baxter (New York: Arno Press, 1974).

² A proclamation issued in Paris in 1797 read as follows: "It is a contravention of the constitutional charter. . . to insult, provoke, or threaten citizens because of their choice of clothing. Let taste and propriety preside over your dress; never turn away from agreeable simplicity. . . . RENOUNCE THESE SIGNS OF RALLYING, THESE COSTUMES OF REVOLT, WHICH ARE THE UNIFORM OF AN ENEMY ARMY." quoted in Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45.

³ Thomas Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1989), 4.

⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 157.

⁵ Paul Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, trans. and ed. Manon Souriau (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1983).

⁶ Woolson, *Dress Reform*, 141-142.

⁷ Woolson, *Dress Reform*, 138-139.

⁸ Robert Bartlett Haas, *Muybridge: Man in Motion* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 112.

⁹ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, xix.

¹⁰ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 83.

¹¹ Etienne Decroux, "Is the Advent of Mime Timely?," in Jean Dorcy, *The Mime*, trans. Robert Speller and Pierre de Fontnouvelle (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1961), xxii.

¹² The six conditions are as follows: conformity with personal habits, absence of visible effort, absence of noise, apparent lightness, maximum firmness at the point of support, and minimum of apparent resistance. Immediately following this inventory of requirements Souriau provides a list of conditions necessary for what he calls the "psychological ease of movement." These conditions include: freedom in the rhythm, freedom in purpose, and prodigality in effort. Of this secondary category, Souriau writes, "The more a movement is regular, economical, and rigorously adapted to its intent, the more beautiful it is. But to appear graceful, the rhythm of the movement cannot be monotonous, its intent too apparent, nor its economy too great" (88).

¹³ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 84.

¹⁴ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 84-85.

¹⁵ Stanislavski quoted in Bari Rolfe ed., *Mimes on Miming: Writing on the Art of Mime* (Los Angeles: Panjandrum Books, nd), 88.

¹⁶ Gordon Craig in Bari Rolfe ed., *Mimes on Miming*, 88.

¹⁷ Etienne Decroux, "Is the Advent of Mime Timely?," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, xxi.

¹⁸ Etienne Decroux, "Is the Advent of Mime Timely?," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, xxi.

¹⁹ I find it intriguing that theoretical alterations in the concept of aesthetics so often follow technological advancements in what might be read as an effort to re-describe the body in relation to new technological and social conditions.

This remains for me a long term interest and part of a larger project which I will not pursue here, but nevertheless it is interesting to note that the work of Paul Souriau is no exception insofar as the subject he is perhaps most directly, though not explicitly, concerned with is the work of E.J. Marey who, like Muybridge, studied bodies in motion and whose book, *Movement*, had a significant influence on art of modernism.

²⁰ Etienne Decroux, *Words on Mime*, quoted in Leabhart, 44.

²¹ Etienne Decroux, *Words on Mime*, quoted in Leabhart, 44.

²² Jean Dorcy, unidentified Paris newspaper, 1945, quoted in Leabhart, 48.

²³ Jean-Louis Barrault, "The Tragic Mime," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, 96.

²⁴ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 84.

²⁵ Souriau, *The Aesthetics of Movement*, 84.

²⁶ Jean-Louis Barrault, "The Tragic Mime," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, 95.

²⁷ Marcel Marceau, "The Poetic Halo," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, 104.

²⁸ Decroux, "For Better and for Worse," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, 83.

²⁹ Decroux, "For Better and for Worse," in Dorcy, *The Mime*, 83.

³⁰ It is of some interest to note that while Decroux's near naked performances were considered extreme and even immoral (he and Barrault were in fact both nudists and vegetarians), the total nudity of Marey's photographic subjects (something Decroux believed corporeal mime required along with its unfurnished stage) was accepted because it was "scientific" in nature. We see here, perhaps, the threat of seduction that accompanies the aesthetic version of scientific endeavors. The point here is that by being in some sense fashioned, or by being made, in Souriau's sense, graceful, the body achieves a new and threatening potency that is tied to its intentionality. As Souriau writes at the end of his chapter on grace, "At least in the human species, it is incontestable that grace of movement is one of the most powerful elements of seduction [and] that it is deliberately sought to this end" (95).

³¹ Carmel Snow with Mary Aswell, *The World of Carmel Snow* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962), 88; quoted in Nancy Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography* (New York: Alpine Book Co., 1979), 72.