

Somewhere, someone is doing something

Somewhere, someone is doing something. Then, they may do that something again. Or maybe they will do something else. That, after all, is the nature of reality. But it's also the nature of magic. And if, by magic, we mean creating a poetic impression that astonishes people, then someone is doing it — in a gallery or a theatre, a kitchen or a train station — every single day, somewhere.

For the theatre director Peter Brook, magic was “the transformation of something” that an audience “would normally take to be banal and which they actually find is extraordinary (because everything can be).” He explained in a TV interview, that “by the power of the actor calling on all his resources, the audience sees [something very ordinary] transformed”. Further, if we are to consult one of the definitive anthropological texts on gesture, Marcel Mauss stated magic might entail an interplay of magicians, actions and representations, technically, but above all else it necessitates belief: “Magic is believed and not perceived. It is a condition of the collective soul, a condition which is confirmed and verified by its results. Yet it remains mysterious even for the magician”. In executing a rite or performing a trick even the magician does not wholly know what they are doing, beyond the immediately observable. What is done to the air and to the soul and to the unknown audience remains a mystery. One can only believe in it and be in awe. In an examination of a particular mode of theatre, the “Holy Theatre”, Brook also touched on this phenomena, advising dramatists and actors (and indeed, everyone): “We have to accept we can never see all of the invisible. So after straining toward it, we have to face defeat. Drop down to earth, then start up again.”

Because everything can be extraordinary, we can see it everywhere. Let us start at a train station. There is an extraordinary sequence in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), in which we witness three thieves at work, in the Gare de Lyon and in a train carriage. Coily, opportunistically, in a slalom of scanning eyeballs, they locate their targets and with elegant sleight-of-hand slide open bags and into sleeves to retrieve wallets and bank notes. The scene occurs over four-minutes paced by the diegetic clap of heels on cold tiles, like the scuttle of pointe shoes traversing a stage. We have in this exacting choreography a case-study of gestural precision, of the invisible-made-visible. As in magic, it is a gestural routine we are not meant to see, if those gestures are to be effective. If caught in the act, the pickpocket has failed. With Bresson we are a privileged viewer, witnessing the mechanisms of the magic trick.

Writing on *Pickpocket* Gary Indiana states, “Bresson shows that most of our lives are consumed by meaningless routines” and *Pickpocket*'s protagonist Michel “steals because it is the only act that makes him feel alive in a world becoming dead”. The gesture of stealing interrupts routines to announce alternatives. In the words of American entertainer and performance artist Andy Kaufman: “That's what I do in my act, test how other people deal with reality.” Bresson was concerned with using “working models, taken from life” and he observed that “when there is a group of very skilled pickpockets [...] something remarkable happens. I mean: something happens in the air as much as to the wallets.” In the film, the pickpockets' gestures act not only on the target of their attention, but — played out before an attentive audience — they also create an air of astonishment in their deft manipulation of the everyday.

If Bresson's Michel picked at the seams of other people's routines, then filmmaker Chantal Akerman dealt with reality through an unflinching belief in routines. And, sliding into Akerman's 1975 *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, we can appreciate other skilled gestures; from picking pockets to peeling potatoes. The film is a Greek Tragedy where very little happens, until it does.

The script was written by Akerman in two weeks. As its audiences will know, the film has limited dialogue and plot, accordingly the script is instead an enfolded syntax with a particular grammar of domestic gestures: chopping, peeling, unpacking, brushing, smoothing. The script, Akerman explained, contains every movement in the 198 minute epic; plotting this came naturally, because she had seen the movements “all around” her. That is, in a family of women, she had observed her protagonist’s gestures countless times, repeated daily to punctuate moments and hours, beginnings and endings. These were the gestures that occupied the space of abandoned rituals, providing bodies and minds with something to do.

Akerman’s intention for the film was “to give all these actions that are typically devalued, a life on film” and, to give them such a “life”, the someone doing those things had to be unexpected. Delphine Seyrig was always going to be Jeanne Dielman because she could never be. Delphine was, in Akerman’s words, “a lady”, a glamorous movie-star, not someone who changed bed sheets or peeled potatoes. And yet over unbroken minutes, we watch Delphine-as-Jeanne peel potatoes with religious focus, and those gestures hidden in plain sight suddenly become visible. Akerman’s potato-peeling sequence is a magic show with no trick. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, is in some ways then, what Peter Brook meant by “Holy Theatre”, what can also be called “the theatre of invisible made visible”, where “the actor invokes, lays bare what lies in every man — and what daily life covers up”. And Delphine-as-Jeanne’s gestures are not to be dismissed as task-oriented, operational gestures of (house)work. They are, in and of themselves, operative; they work — on the mind, and the world — because, as a kind of motor, they allow our protagonist to go on doing and being. It is only when the gestures fail — when things are dropped, glitch and gag — that gestures reveal their other face, as that which can interrupt flow.

In a collection of essays on gesture, media theorist Vilém Flusser wrote that “the observation of gestures allows us to ‘decipher’ the way we exist in the world. One of the implications of this hypothesis is that modifications we can observe in our gestures allow us to ‘read’ the existential changes we are currently undergoing.” In Jeanne Dielman, as our protagonist deviates from her routine gestures, so too does she drop her fraudulent mask of emotional control. She gets out of bed too early, the potatoes are overcooked and the film ends with a murder.

Peeling potatoes, picking pockets and magic all deal with reality — whether one is escaping or enduring it — through gestures of manipulation and control, and above all belief.

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