The order of gestures: a social history of sensibilities under the Ancien Régime in France

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When Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne decided to make a film based on a sixteenth-century legal case, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, they encountered the fundamental problem of how to transfer gestures and attitudes of the characters onto the screen. The work was a great success.

The work or the works? It existed in at least four different forms: (1) the preparatory historical study which was entrusted to the American historian Natalie Zemon Davis; (2) 'a story, a tale', drawn from her work by Carrière and Vigne; (3) the scenario (a very 'technical' job according to these authors); (4) finally, the film. One only has to compare these four versions to note that the descriptions – and often mere suggestions – of gesture were not made in an identical way.

This is an exciting problem which demonstrates the necessity for historical reflection that pays attention to the daily realities of life in the past. For how is it possible to understand bygone ages if we do not try to mentally reconstruct the framework of daily life and the bodily movements of those people of the past, as every good film-director has to do?
Since the pioneering work of Norbert Elias such a perspective has become perfectly respectable: the body is now an important object of historical reflection. Consequently, even the most fleeting gestures must command our attention, as they define manners of behaviour inscribed in collective sensibilities, i.e. in the general cultural codes and rites which transmit values through norms. Indeed, that is also the lesson of non-European anthropology: for example, by observing the gestures and attitudes of spectators of cock-fights, Clifford Geertz was able to disentangle the web of Balinese culture and arrive at its founding principles.

If we want to apply this technique to the Ancien Régime in France, we are of course confronted by an area of research too vast to be covered by this contribution. For that reason I will limit myself to a few essential notions by which I hope to open up avenues for future study. In my opinion, no human society is purely 'natural'; in this sense, gestures equally partake of culture. So it is important first to define such an anthropological theory as it is the basis of what follows. Relying on some of my earlier studies which I will not repeat in detail here, I would like to stress the effects of a growing cultural bipolarization expressed through the body and gestures. This process is in no sense specific to France but can be observed, with various nuances, throughout Europe. It is well demonstrated by Flemish and Dutch genre-painting (pictures that were also popular in France) and deeply revealing of a new 'art of gesture'.

THE HISTORY OF GESTURE:
A CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

How do we write a history of gesture? In my opinion, a workable method has to introduce anthropological curiosity into a solidly historical framework. The studies by Erving Goffman and those of ethologists, in particular Edward T. Hall, may serve as guides in this field, though they cannot be transferred directly to situations in the past because they rest on observations and sociological experiences of the present. But at least, they will provide us with some fundamental notions which the historian has to combine.
Gestures under the Ancien Regime in France

with his own thoughts – the thoughts of a 'man of paper', who
mentally tries to reconstruct worlds which he can no longer
experience physically.

In my own investigation I will be guided by two operational
concepts. The first, borrowed from Goffman, defines the world as
a theatre where the social relations are the object of a continuous
staging. The second, derived from ethology, notes the importance
in all animal and human societies of a 'territory of my own' which
every individual uses in order to come into contact with others or
to avoid them. We issue signals (especially gestures) codified to
indicate an expression of respect, a demand for consideration, or
even a desire for a confrontation." Taken together, these two
principles define systems of comportment based on a ritual
segmentation of the body – or, more simply, on a usage of the
latter – which differs according to civilizations.

By being attentive to social and chronological dimensions, the
historian can make his own contribution to such an anthropological
theory. Studying gesture presupposes before everything a precise
statement of the typological role of every actor and his frame of
reference. For it is important to know whether one is speaking of
Europe, France, a region, or just a small village, in as much the
Ancien Régime is not a uniform world. Even more important is the
social situation of those whose gestures one analyses. Is it not
evident that attitudes, comportments, and sensibilities change in
meaning depending on criteria of wealth or poverty? Equally they
differ according to sex, age-group, or even type of situation as, for
instance, the normality of working days or the inveresive character
of festivals.'

Since the historian cannot walk the streets of the past in order to
observe ordinary situations, he usually has to work with incomplete
documentation which is more often biased towards the exceptional
than to the normal events of everyday life. Regarding the study of
gestures, this situation is not necessarily a handicap as departures
from normality allow us to pass from observable attitudes to
underlying sensibilities much easier than ordinary occasions do.
For example, legal sources furnish precise information about
gestural codes used in insults, thus allowing us to deduce the
conception of personal and collective honour of the social groups
in question: the point of honour amongst nobles, the protection of
virgins' and women's purity by their fathers, husbands and brothers; the macho ethic of young men on the brink of marriage who proudly carried the symbols of their power: the feather in their hat and sword at their side. In this way I have been able to study the signs of conflict in the countryside of Artois: mimicry, hissing, the habit of 'beating the street' or a tree with one's sword, of moving close to someone else and brushing against him – these are often the start of fatal fights between bachelors.

In this way common structures of conflict emerge behind such brutal gestural codes, illuminating the relations between ages and sexes, permitting us to define the conditions of the normal social equilibrium. In a similar way war, plague, situations of great fear, strong demographic growth – in short everything that disturbs norms and traditions – bring about conflicts and attempts at restoring the equilibrium. The gestures employed in these cases, for example during a charivari, supply us then with the keys to interpret the culture in which they are expressed.

One of the difficulties in such a study arises from the fact that every historical document can give indications about gestures but no well-defined series of sources, except legal ones, is specifically oriented to this area of research. For this reason it is important to concentrate our research on what I will call 'fields of coherence' (champs de cohérence). To start with, nothing is as important in my opinion as familiarity with criminal archives, not because a sociology of delinquency might be found there (which would be another project) but because one can draw from it countless elements of familiarity with the ordinary structures of life in the past. The depositions of witnesses or the letters of remission not only illuminate the actual crime, but numerous seemingly insignificant or accidental details relate the realities of the age. In fact, the most interesting social situations for a history of gestures are those of 'social friction', i.e. the circumstances where people meet: the church, the tavern, festivals, crowds, and public places. In other words, we must concentrate our attention on normal cultural codes, on the expressions of sociability which cannot fail to appear when the supplicant conjures up the circumstances of his crime. This concern for veracity is particularly marked in the letters of remission as a pardon was only granted if the guilty person could argue strong extenuating circumstances and had related in minute
detail how he had acted, thus enabling the legal officers to verify his account.

Admittedly, some historians may have reservations about looking for norms in documents principally oriented towards deviancy. In order to reassure them and to complete my approach it is important to support the connections discovered in this way with those that emerge from other evidence, such as literature or theatre, etiquette books, and even better – at least in my opinion – in painting."

**SOCIAL CODES AND CULTURAL BIPOLARIZATION FROM THE SIXTEENTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

All gestures can appear natural but all are equally cultural because as we have learned from the ethnologists, no human society is 'primitive'. Everywhere we can observe codes of behaviour which are based on a specific world-view. Perhaps those communities which we used to call 'uncivilized' distinguished themselves from ours by a certain homogeneity despite differences in social status, age, or gender. But Europe, at least since the Middle Ages, has shown important differences between popular culture (admittedly, a simplifying term) and that of the dominant groups in society. Already half a century ago Norbert Elias demonstrated in a remarkable way the changes in comportment of these elites since the fourteenth century, a result of a process of 'civilization of manners'." Picking up his dossier in the case of France and the Netherlands I have described in my *L'invention de l'homme moderne* (1988) the results of this growing cultural bipolarization.¹³ Within this brief study, I would simply like to stress the close tie between gestures and culture in the lower and the dominant classes of society, as well as the slow transition from the notion of a magic body to that of a sacred one.

Gestures are in fact mediations which permit the passage from nature to culture, i.e. from the body (gender, sensation) to comportment, the latter being the transmitter of collective mental-ities. Considered in this way, gestures of peasants, as described in legal, religious or literary texts, have a profound meaning, often
unrecognized by the outside observers who have left us the testimonies in question.

In his *Contes et discours d'Eutravel*, published in 1555, the Breton Noel du Fail describes the *veillée* (the gathering of women from surrounding farms or villages in someone's barn to spin or sew) on winter evenings. He brilliantly evokes the postures of the youth of both sexes, for whom this is a good occasion 'to make love through marriage', i.e. to practise a form of courtship consisting of minor liberties, of diversions, and of laughs. The gestures made at these evenings can be analysed at two levels. Some only transmit conventional sentiments, specifically those supported by a group's ethics. The boys, for example, try to touch the girls to steal a kiss from them, or to amuse them. But if in the heat of action they indecently show the 'upper part of their trousers open' the girls 'start to laugh loudly with their hand half-hiding their eyes'. In this way our source defines a boundary of female modesty and a small transgression which is possible in the context of the *veillée*, while implying that such comportment is not admissible in general. In the same text, a second level of gestures permits us to recover the proper codes: the boys, who would have liked 'to make eyes, to put back in place the breasts which had slipped down to the armpits through the continuous movement of the spindle, and secretly to steal a kiss by tapping the shoulder from behind, were controlled by a group of old women whose hollow eyes pierced right into the cow-shed, or by the master of the house who was lying on his side in his bed near-by... and in such full view that nothing could be hidden from him.'"

This *veillée* constitutes a kind of peasant micro-society, bringing into contact within a limited space age-groups and sexes. Numerous other descriptions demonstrate that this occasion was fundamental to the transmission of culture, as the courting described here was strictly codified. Like everywhere else, sexuality is not something free in the rural world. The normal gestural latitude allowed to adolescents of both sexes is precisely defined by the supervision of the old women and the heads of the families. But Noel du Fail does not only describe anecdotal events. He allows us to understand the functioning of a structure of relationship which imposes upon everybody obligatory codes regarding marriage since that is the fundamental element for the succession of generations and the stability of
society. Under the watchful eye of the master of the house, who represents the authority of the established adults, the female world mimes the eternal game of supervision (the old women) and fascination (the girls) in front of the third element, the male youths. Each of the members of this triad has its own role to play and to express it by gesture, even though sometimes things get out of hand.\textsuperscript{15}

Two centuries later these roles and gestures remain essentially the same in the country despite the impact of the 'civilization of manners'. Some twenty years before the French revolution, Nicholas Restif de la Bretonne (1734–1806) described at length the manners of the peasants of his birthplace, Sacy (Yonne). The separation of the sexes was obligatory: the girls distrusted the big youths who lusted for their virtue and the fathers or brothers continued to supervise this symbolic good on which the honour of the family depended. This is shown by the codes employed at the veillée and elsewhere. For example, in courting a girl it was advisable first to hang around

the house for some months before it is possible to speak to her. People talk about it in the countryside and the girl learns that a Pierrot or a Jacquot hangs around the house because of her. One evening, out of pure curiosity, she finds an excuse to go out... but the parents are not fooled. If the boy suits them they don't say a word and the girl can go out of the house. If, however, they don't like him, the mother or father stands up, pushes the girl back into her chair or seat, and says: 'Stay there, I'll go myself'... But if the girl is left to go out, then the boy approaches her and caresses her... Subsequently, she goes out every evening... On Sundays they talk without doing anything, and that is the day that the boy will take a chance and kiss her, but it is rare that the girls are not sensible.

Restif adds that the companionship normally lasts two or three years and that marriage in the first winter is usually out of the question. The parents of the girl rarely ask the boy about his intentions before the second year of the companionship and then with the question: 'What are you coming here to do, Jacquot?'\textsuperscript{16}

In fact, words are rare and chaste in evoking marriage or other questions of prime importance such as sex. In general, gestures
suffice as they carry precise messages that everybody in the rural
world can interpret without difficulty. Folklorists have noted the
endurance of these practices until modern times, such as conveying
one's refusal to grant the hand of one's daughter by seemingly
insignificant and irrelevant gestures: only giving eggs to a guest,
stirring the fire, not giving a chair to a suitor who enters the house,
and so on."

Such a codification is not at all arbitrary. It is normally expressed
in interrelationships between persons who know each other's
position (wealth, power, age, gender) exactly and in the purpose of
the request. Admittedly, when analysing gestures it is often
difficult to recover the entire chain of meaning in question.
Gestures are only the visible parts of types of behaviour proper to
adult males, women, male youths, children, or marginal groups.
Despite regional differences and developments between the sixteenth
and eighteenth centuries, all these categories are inserted in a
conception of the world typical of inhabitants of the country.
About 1700, the prior of Sennely-en-Sologne described it well,
despite his prejudices as a man of the church faced with
'superstitions':

The Solognots all have the looks and manners of simpletons, they
seem to be stupid, practically numb, and yet there are few people
who are more spirited. They are shrewd and such masters in
dissimulation that they can cheat even the most prudent people...
Even the children are reserved in their conversations and cautious
in not saying anything that can trap them. They keep a gloomy
silence which surprises those who do not know their natures and
they are imagined to be as spirited as statues. They never deviate
from their maxim, which is to speak little but well.18

For Solognots of 1700 as for the Bretons of the sixteenth century
as depicted by Noel du Fail, the gestural codes form a language
parallel to that of the word. The body is profoundly expressive and
it is magical. After all, is the eye of the sorcerer not capable of
casting a spell? With grumbling forbearance the prior of Sennely
translates this idea by claiming that his parishioners are 'baptized
idolaters'. He illustrates his view by relating some examples of
gestures, particularly at the hour of death:
Letting the yoke of a plough catch fire they regard as an error punishable by death, and the poor sick are often seen in their agony hiding themselves under the pillow of their bed from fear that they inadvertently had let one catch fire. They are also scrupulous in doing the washing at a time when a sick person has received extreme unction. They doubt the salvation of a person who dies turned towards the wall, claiming that the devil is watching to seize the souls of those who die at that side."

Story-tellers, authors, observers like the prior of Sennely, or keepers of legal records of rural areas allow us to recover the gestures of peasants and interpret them. Unfortunately, the objects of our interest were often illiterate at that time and therefore left little direct evidence. So in general we will have to analyse the comportments and mentalities through documents deriving from the higher cultural strata. We must be careful, of course, to distinguish descriptions of realities from the usually more or less prejudicial judgements with which they are interspersed but if we do so, two quite distinct fields of coherence emerge: popular and elite culture. The second allows us to test the progress of the cultural bipolarization during modern times, as each witness defines, at least subconsciously, the distance he perceives between the strange comportments of which he speaks and those which he himself has assimilated.

There is no need here to repeat the analyses by Norbert Elias of the 'evolution of manners' in French court circles and urban elites." It will be enough to note, in the wake of numerous scholars, that the standards of taste or lack of taste, and those of shame, changed slowly within the upper social minorities." The 'modernization' of gestures manifests itself in a repudiation of everything that is too animal in man. As in Molière's Tartuffe (1664), it involves a minimum of hiding, not only 'that breast I would not know how to look upon' but also the exercise of one's natural functions, nudity, sexuality, and those postures which make one resemble the animals. The development was, admittedly, neither linear nor rapid and we have to take heed of numerous subtle distinctions so as not to distort the phenomenon. It is a fact that both France and the Catholic southern Netherlands witnessed the triumph of the morality of the Counter-Reformation, sustained
by the absolutist state from about the seventeenth century onwards. It is a minor but none the less enlightening detail, that the tendency of religious authorities to combat all indecency finally led to the painting over of Renaissance nudes, now deemed too provocative; the nudes of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel are a case in point.

All this points to a rejection more of the magical or animal body than of sexuality alone. The new morality is a philosophy of life which aims at focusing the efforts of Christians on their salvation at the expense of gratifications sought in the material world and sensual pleasures. Reaching for holiness by mortifying the flesh and ignoring one's needs was obviously not within the grasp of ordinary people but everybody had to try and control his passions so as not to become their slave. The combined efforts of the religious and civil authorities joined with the moralizing or educational tendencies of the day in an effort to push the magical body back into the demonic realm of darkness and to encourage the well-to-do to see their physical body as a sacred envelope linking them directly to God and to his lieutenant on earth, the absolute king.

Confronted with the resistance of the popular classes, especially the peasants, the authorities and the members of the upper classes expressed in derogatory terms the gestures, customs, and 'mentalité' of that other cultural pole which they no longer understood. From then on police regulations are teeming with symptomatic prohibitions. ** The seignorial law of Cerny-les-Bucy, in the bailiwick of Vermandois, for example, prohibits dancing in the street or in public places on Sundays and holidays. It threatens with a fine of twenty livres 'all young men and others' who insisted on a 'bien venue' or presented 'bouquets on the occasion of weddings, betrothals, baptisms'. The law even instructed mothers 'to keep their children close to them in the churches, not allowing them to run about, wander, or make a noise, and not give them toys', and prohibited any person from taking a dog into the said churches, on pain of a fine of forty sous. The police regulations of the bailiwick of l'Isle-Adam (Val d'Oise), dated 1 September 1780, contain similar orders, notably prohibiting everyone 'of all ages and all sexes from defecating in cemeteries around churches on pain of a fine of three pounds fifteen sous', as well as from letting animals
graze in the cemeteries, even if one had bought the grass for the church's profit, and finally, prohibiting all 'merchants, traders and others from displaying goods and foodstuffs for sale in the cemeteries and church porches on pain of a fine of ten pounds'.

The constant repetition of such orders suggests the resistance of the peasants. The gestures evoked in these documents mix the sacred with the profane and are sometimes indecent, dirty, or disorderly. None the less, they do belong to the cultural traditions of the countryside, as is demonstrated by the use of the cemetery or the church, or by the evocation of the customary rights of bachelors organized into 'abbayes de jeunesse' to impose on new members a 'welcome' and to demand gifts in kind or cash on the occasion of a marriage or a baptism. The logic of the police rests on a conception of the body which is, yes, policed, but it comes into collision with the tenacity of the codes behind the gestures in question. We find an indifference to demands for hygiene soon to be imposed in the cities as the eighteenth century approached, combined with the maintenance of an intense sociability, even in the places reserved for the dead. And the same tenacity could be found in the still intact power of social roles, as represented by the bachelors and by the world of women who still raised their children in a way that did not please the authorities.

Thus the underlying logic that appears in these documents stems from the norms mainly practised by the upper classes, as much at court as in the cities. The ecclesiastical leaders were obviously well-placed to formulate this growing cultural bipolarization. Just as the prior of Sennely did, so Jean-Baptiste Thiers, the curate of Champrond-en-Gâtine in the diocese of Chartres, deplored the fact that the people abandoned themselves to countless 'superstitions', which he enumerated in his Traité des superstitions (1679). Numerous gestures, which appeared strange or were disapproved by the curate (his morality and not that of the peasants, of course) relate to the magical body I defined earlier. Thus, newly-weds dreaded particularly the spell of 'cording', the symbolic act of tying a cord which prevents a husband from fulfilling his conjugal duties as a result of the malevolence of a magician. Amongst the formulas to get rid of the spell, Thiers mentions the following: 'the newly-weds to be completely nude and the husband to kiss the wife's big toe on the left foot and the wife the husband's big toe on
the left foot', or 'urinate in the keyhole of the church where they were married'. A twentieth-century psychologist would undoubtedly see many sexual symbols here and, in the first 'remedy', an amusing way to arouse a dormant libido. In this first example however, we find a concrete and precise gesture of untying, applying a magical corporal symmetry; during the wedding ceremony the magician had made knots in a piece of cord, binding in this way the sexual capacities of the husband which therefore had to be disentangled, in the literal sense of the word, by the proposed gymnastics. The symbolism of the keyhole and the urine in the second case is obvious enough not to need stressing: the magical body returns to the locations of the double rite, religious and maleficent, in order to destroy the latter by reinforcing the former.

I cannot analyse Thiers' entire book here. Having waged war against the peasants' errors, the author provides us with a very important harvest of ethnological data, though the facts are insufficiently dated and insufficiently localized. When used with other descriptions of this kind and with the notes in legal sources (which are more limited but better embedded in their historical context) this book may enable us to draw up repertories of gestures and reach back to the codes of behaviour from which they derive. The field of marriage offers numerous gestures to be studied. For example, 'when there is a widow or some girl to be wed in a house and their hand is sought in marriage one must be very careful of removing logs from the fire, because that drives away those in love.'** Was this a proverb? Or an allusion to some obscure magical act? Neither, for this was a simple social ritual which was poorly understood by Thiers. We have already seen that courting proceeded slowly, without verbally expressing what one hoped for. In this case, taking away the logs was simply part of a well-established code of a father's refusing the suitor of his daughter. No wonder this gesture drove away those in love!

In a peasant world that is inclined to signs and gestures, many actions derive a solid meaning from a silent language. Other gestures reveal a magical view of the human body: as Thiers observed, 'Some take a dead man's bone from a newly-dug grave, soak it in water for one day and one night and make their intended wife drink this water.' Elsewhere, he condemns the practice of
baptizing 'a particular membrane called "le nombril de l'enfant" [the caul], when it is seen coming from the mother's womb and it still encloses the baby's body.'\textsuperscript{26} This rite improves the luck that is supposed to accompany the child being born with the caul. And if it wears the remains of this amniotic membrane around its neck, it will become totally invulnerable to any weapon whatsoever.

Working for the good of the Church, Thiers cannot admit such beliefs, or, more generally, any attitude which departs from official orthodoxy. Like so many of his contemporaries within the civilized or upper strata, he indiscriminately condemns phenomena of a mental order, especially magical beliefs, and social practices such as dances, ways of courting, or customs attached to the rituals of private or public life (marriage, charivari, youth festivals etc.). In other words, official culture sets itself up as unique and refuses to admit a general logic other than its own, labelling everything deviating from the norm as 'superstitions'. We have seen, however, that the historian can still recover the internal logic of popular culture, as expressed in the gestures \textit{painted} from life by observers such as Thiers. The peasant world displays an extraordinary capacity for passive resistance, thus preserving the substance of its world view as is demonstrated by the rich harvest of practices and beliefs collected by the folklorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{27} As for the other cultural pole, that of the 'modernization' of gestures, it frequently expresses itself in the form of a new art of experiencing one's body.

\textbf{The art of gesture}

The body certainly reflects cultural practices. The body of the sixteenth-century courtier, the seventeenth-century 'honnête homme', and the eighteenth-century 'homme éclairé' distinguishes itself both from animals and from the rude or gross manners of the lower classes. In fact, the peasant often constitutes a kind of counter-example because both eye-witnesses and painters like to emphasize those traits which bring him close to the animal world. The standards of shame and of the whole theatre of gesture among the upper classes underwent far-reaching changes in the early modern period. From the publication in 1530 of Erasmus's \textit{De
civilitate *morum puerilium* onwards, the children of the most prominent families (later also the pupils at the *colleges*) acquire the new rules of courtesy which spread gradually among the upper classes and even among some prominent peasants.\(^{28}\) The structuring of body and gesture is profoundly altered within these sections of the population and that distinguishes them more and more from the majority of the rural population and from the lowest classes in the towns.

It is impossible to sketch here in detail this major process of the *invention de l’homme moderne*, one which runs along different lines according to the social groups involved.\(^{29}\) I will confine myself to an attempt to determine the exact place of genre painting within such a mechanism. Produced in the Low Countries and much valued in France (at least, apparently, amongst the well-to-do classes in the towns), this style develops a moralist viewpoint, disparaging the imperfections of the lower classes and imparting to those who enjoy this painting a feeling of superiority that highlights the cultural bipolarization mentioned earlier. So it plays a part which compares with that of Thiers’s *Traité des superstitions* or similar texts. Exposing such errors, either through humour or the severe admonitions of the Church, probably served more to educate the elite who bought these books and paintings than to genuinely change the attitudes of the peasants or the poorer townsfolk. This line of development, which for lack of a better term we may call 'bourgeois', is different from a rigid imitation of superior models which we find more often among the courtiers or the aristocracy. Besides following the manuals on civility, these latter groups also had to master such 'techniques de corps' as the art of fencing or horse riding, thus establishing a major distance between themselves and the 'bourgeois gentilhomme' who in Molière’s famous play attempts to mimic them (1670). The upper classes preferred portraits and allegorical compositions to genre painting, because 'la figure de l’homme est le plus parfait ouvrage de Dieu sur la terre', as Félibien put it in 1667.\(^{30}\) Those who admired the picture of Richelieu by Philippe de Champigne or those who had themselves portrayed by Pierre Subleyras in eighteenth-century Toulouse tried to come as close as possible to the sources of distinction and power by adhering to the artistic standards of classicism.
Genre painting, then, does not express the taste of the elite in its entirety. Research in notarial archives, for example in inventories of the deceased, may enable us to refine this sociological sketch. In the meantime, we can only define the theoretical message by what the great French masters considered a minor form of pictorial representation.

Paul Vandenbroeck has convincingly demonstrated that Hieronymus Bosch gave visual expression to the social ethic of the prosperous citizens of towns in the Netherlands and southern Germany by labelling the excesses of Carnival and, more generally, all sexual or bodily expressions as madness. One can detect here the starting point for the moralization and modernization of gesture within these urban upper classes. Subsequently, Pieter Brueghel the Elder resumes this theme of rustic rudeness but with more sympathy for the lower classes. Can it be that the drunkard, or the figure urinating or defecating in the sight of everyone in a corner of the painting, makes the buyers of these paintings laugh and enables them to distance themselves from those represented? Anyway, the metaphorical sense is often emphasized by the artist or his imitators. The Ass at School, engraved after Brueghel in 1557, has a Latin legend which explains that a stupid animal, even though sent to Paris for study, will remain what he is (see figure 6.1). I would like to interpret this scene as a highly ironic denunciation of the attempt at educating children, in particular those of the common people, as is suggested by the background and the mention of Paris – a cultural centre that is supposed to transform the donkey into a horse. The piling up of bodies, grimaces, the showing of bare bottoms or genitals close to the teacher, various postures that are never upright or well-controlled (with the exception of that of the teacher): everything is the exact reverse of the gestures recommended in Erasmus's manual on civility. For a literate person, the undisciplined and obscene children represent a (wrong) state of nature which contrasts with the education recommended for the well-to-do, and which reminds us also of the fact that the peasants who do not even go to school are as incapable as the donkey of changing their comportment.

The Pedlar Pillaged by the Apes, engraved in 1562, expresses the disturbances of the natural state in a similar fashion (see figure 6.2). At a time in which an ethic was established that disapproved of
looseness and indecency, it was wiser to use a group of monkeys rather than humans to portray natural activities. Two of the ape-like creatures imitate children by jumping around on hobby-horses (for the monkey can be represented with much greater liberty in this area). The cottage in the background alludes to the countryside at the edge of which a hawker has fallen asleep. The undisciplined animals are pillaging his stock-in-trade, dispersing the objects that symbolize urban progress: gloves, mirror, spectacles. In other words, the innovations are the object of facetious behaviour or of appropriation by these little people symbolizing the peasants, as some gestures clearly demonstrate. Four apes are dancing in a circle to the sound of instruments which have come from the pedlar's basket as young peasants used to do during a feast. In the foreground, a monkey detectates into the pedlar's hat. In the tavern numerous quarrels arose from behaviour of this type. Perched on the back of the merchant, another monkey searches for lice on his

Figure 6.1 Pieter Brueghel (after), *The Ass at School*, 1557, engraving. (© Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam.)
Figure 6.2 Pieter Brueghel (after), The Pedlar Pillaged by the Ages, 1562, engraving.

(© Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam.)
head while another one holds his nose near the behind of the sleeper. The scatological dimension, so well presented by Rabelais, aims at making us laugh at the natural odour and lice which accompany man during his whole life. The peasants did not at all doubt the usefulness of delousing and in fact it was known as a gesture of affection among those close to another. Without trying to force the interpretation, it seems evident that Brueghel plays with the opposition between nature and culture. By being amused the urban upper classes that owned such prints were able to see a difference between the 'animal world' of the countryside and their own. Surely this is the first stage on the path to a moralization which would lead to an aversion to the lower part of the body and vulgar gestures.

But this process was not complete. Painting, like the theatre, purges the passions, teaching the eye and mind of the citizen to distinguish himself from the unruly and licentious realm of people depicted by the artist. Brueghel, however, belonged to a particular moment in history, when the morals of the upper classes sometimes still incorporated such behaviour. As a consequence, their judgements remained indulgent; some buyers probably did not even notice the cultural distance that Brueghel rendered in metaphor. But in the second half of the sixteenth century the situation gradually became more clearly defined, leading in the end to a very sharp cultural differentiation in the seventeenth century. In France the aversion at that time taken to the 'dirty' works of Rabelais went hand in hand with the dismissal of nudity and all verbal obscenity, to be noticed, for example, among the works of the précieuses.

At that moment a second phase had been reached; genre painting now increasingly relied upon the image of otherness, i.e. of difference, to structure a representation of self common to the artists and the buyers of their work. A recent exhibition held at Antwerp testifies to this: the phenomenon unfolds across the whole of Europe between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries, assuming various forms successively. Amongst its constants we find the definition of civilized life, city-life in particular: the artists love to suggest it by painting its contrary, the uncivilized existence of the peasants.33

One ought to examine genre painting systematically in order to
determine its precise role in the gestural and bodily education of the upper classes. Some paintings clearly demonstrate what was not deemed proper, reinforcing in this way the lesson of the manuals on civility, though perhaps offering as well the gratification of a little transgression, given the gratifications contrary to the teachings of the Church and civility. The Feast of the Epiphany (before 1656) by Jacob Jordaens takes place in a sumptuous interior (see figure 6.3). There reigns an atmosphere of disorder, drunkenness, and luxury as underlined by the gestures, grimaces and postures of the majority of the diners. Only the queen chosen by the old pot-bellied king (himself appointed by lot) stands out by her distinguished and elegant comportment, the mark of a good education. On the right, a drunkard is vomiting, almost hitting the feet of the spectator. Above the group is the moral of the story, in the form of a Latin device: 'Nothing resembles a fool more than the drunkard'.

It is worth noting that the process of civilization of manners
Figure 6.4 Jan Steen, *Beware of Luxury*, 1663?, Oil on canvas.
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.)
described by Norbert Elias did not only apply to court. Written for the education of a Burgundian prince, Erasmus's *De civilitate* was quickly adopted and imitated by the urban elites of the Netherlands because it fitted so well with the civility they had been striving for since the time of Hieronymus Bosch. Jordaens, and many other painters, are the heirs of this double tradition. Their success with prosperous city-dwellers all over Europe spread the messages involved, producing a 'bourgeois' state of mind, the traces of which can equally be found in the United Provinces. The denunciation of excess and the insistence on a real sense of bodily economy are expressed, for example, in a painting by Jan Steen, *Beware of Luxury* (1663?). Here, intemperance and licentiousness dominate as everyone pursues vain pleasures. Their gestures suggest insouciance, and the bodies of the characters deny the order which the manuals on civility instilled. But the proverb written on a slate at the lower right cautions to be careful at the very moment when one is having a good time. Above the joyous scene a basket containing sticks and swords makes clear that punishment is not far away (see figure 6.4).

It is difficult to conclude, as I have sketched a path of research rather than given a complete history of gestures in the modern period. Perhaps the best I can do at the moment is simply to stress the fact that there is a profusion of material: legal sources, manuals on civility, literature, religious tracts and genre painting, all of which offer a wealth of information. As for the period chosen here, it provides us with a good observation point, as it is a time of a slow but all-pervasive cultural bipolarization. Though devalued, gestures attached to a magical conception of the body do not always disappear completely but they do fall into an inevitable decline. In France, as in other countries, court circles and the bourgeoisie defined themselves more and more by a philosophy of the sacred, producing an 'economy' of gesture which was quite different from that of the peasants and the poor city-dwellers. The history of gesture, then, provides us with keys to interpret such phenomena which continue in our day.
NOTES

2 Norbert Elias, Uber den Prozess der Zivilisation: Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen (2 vols, Basel, 1939); see also the bibliography at the end of this volume.
6 For examples see my works cited in note 4.
11 For these various types of documentation see Muchembled, L’invention de l’homme moderne (Paris, 1988), p. 12.
12 See Elias, Uber den Prozess der Zivilisation.
13 Muchembled, L’invention, esp. pp. 203–89.
16 Quoted by Flandrin, Les Amours paysannes, pp. 145–6.


19 'Le manuscrit du prieur de Sennely, 1700'.


27 See this impressive study of Van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore*.


29 For more details see Muchembled, *L'invention*, pp. 239–89.


31 On this portrait see Muchembled, *L'invention*, pp. 434–42.
