



Norbert Elias's motion pictures: history, cinema and gestures in the process of civilization

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ABSTRACT

Norbert Elias's project in *The process of civilization* (1939) involved reconstructing invisible movement—both the slow tempo of long-term historical change and the modification of psychic structures and embodied dispositions. To do this, he resorted to uncommon devices: treating historical texts as constituting a series amenable to a rudimentary discourse analysis, he constructed an imagined 'curve of civilization' serving as an approximation of the hidden process of change. Elias's curve was not supposed to represent single past states, but movement itself, its direction and pace. This novel concept of historical representation was related to the perception of cinema as a new medium making actual movement visible. But beyond making it possible to imagine how one could telescope long-term historical process, cinema also held the promise of serving as a microscope, making the minute movements of the human body, gestures and manners available for close inspection. While anthropologists were devising ways of using the new medium to document fleeting gestures and bodily postures, it was used by popular audiences as a source for remodelling behaviour and acquiring polite manners and body techniques, as noticed by such acute observers as Marcel Mauss and Joseph Roth. Hence, popular appropriation of the cinema gave rise to a heightened awareness of the historicity of gestures and the changing modalities of their transmission. Cinema was itself part of the accelerated motion of history, of a perceived change of pace in the process of civilization, which in its turn shed light on its historical antecedents and played an essential role in rethinking the notion of civilization and culture.

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How does one make invisible movement visible? This was the question Norbert Elias (1897–1990) was struggling with, as he spent his days in the library of the British Museum in 1936, reading through existing cultural histories and putting together the elements of what was to become his major work, *The process of civilization*.¹ No problem seems more difficult for historians than

conceptualizing, depicting and explaining change. It happens to be also the most common task they encounter. But in Elias's case, the problem posed itself in a particular, challenging way.

How can one reconstruct a historical process spanning hundreds of years, one that lies well beyond the reach of conventional history? It is through this long-term historical process, Elias assumes, that actors with a particular psychological make-up, capable of coping with the requirements of modern societies, have

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¹ [Elias \(1939\)](#). The first volume, *Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes*, on which I shall focus, had already appeared in preprint in 1937 and its introduction was completed in 1936; the second was published in 1939. Since most libraries have the 1976 edition, which is basically a reprint of the original edition, all references in the following are to this edition ([Elias, 1976a](#) [1939]: Vol. 1; [1976b](#) [1939]: Vol. 2), the critical edition ([Elias, 1997a,b](#) [1939]) and the English translation ([Elias, 1994](#)). The reception of Elias's work is replete with misunderstandings. Among other things, this is to be attributed to the fact that in the late sixties he underwent an abrupt passage from almost complete anonymity to intellectual stardom. It was a process of deadly canonization. As a result, a sharp division emerged between followers and opponents, both often blind to the arguments of their counterparts, a situation that often impedes critical appreciation and creative appropriation of his work. Readers are referred to the enormous scholarly literature on Elias; in tracing the *opérations de recherche* in *The process of civilization* in order to reconstruct their underlying logic, however, I leave aside the question of the validity of Elias's claims and many of the theoretical issues involved (some of my methodological and theoretical critiques have been sketched elsewhere: [Algazi \(2007 \[2000\]\)](#)). Here, it is the *Kunstgriffe* that I'm interested in—the solutions Elias came up with when facing the specific problems arising from his project.

been formed. If practitioners of micro-history would later insist that some processes can only become visible under a microscope,² Elias repeatedly claimed that structural changes in the standards of behaviour or the organization of personality can only be perceived once we go beyond the usual time-frame of conventional historical accounts; one needs a telescope, if you will, in order to discern a process of gradual structural change stretching over hundreds of years. But how can one put together a body of evidence in order to make plausible the claim that such a change indeed took place? And given such a corpus of evidence, how can it be manipulated in order to make this long-term, extremely slow change visible?

The process of civilization, however, was doubly invisible. For not only did it refer, according to Elias, to long-term, slow and imperceptible movement, it also involved a transformation in the actors' personality structure—a growing level of self-control, increasing foresight into the future consequences of one's own and others' actions, and insight into one's own and others' motivations.³ What sort of visible, 'external' evidence could be used in order to make visible the transformation of psychic structures?

Things would have been somewhat simpler had Elias opted for one of the conventional solutions historians usually choose, but he seems to have rejected them, either explicitly or implicitly. This has to do with a further assumption that underlies his project. In his view, the movement of civilization could not be ascribed to any single agent—collective or singular, a person, an idea or an institution—the church, the state, 'the Judaeo-Christian tradition' or their secularized counterparts. No such prime movers could be located outside the process of civilization; they were themselves its products. The movement of civilization could hence not be emplotted as a story with an identifiable hero, some historical subject to whom motivations, goals and purposeful actions could be attributed, but as a *process*—a long-term structured and directional movement⁴—which shaped the actors themselves, their very selves. This type of change could not be conceived or presented in the form of a conventional narrative—historians' classical device for representing change.

How can one make visible a process that almost by definition was invisible, a process that transformed the very make-up of the people involved, that could not be presented in a narrative scheme, and in which movement would be perceived as resulting from sequences of actors' single moves? In London, Elias was reading through existing cultural histories written between the *fin de siècle* and the 1930s.⁵ He seems to have come across some precious hints, a wealth of vignettes and anecdotes—some of which have actually found their way into the pages of *The process of civilization*—but no methodological solutions that he could make his own. As a rule, such histories tended to build massive claims on very limited sets of examples; they were anecdotal, arbitrary and colourful.⁶

Cultural histories tended to be structured around a limited number of striking examples—memorable events or some outstanding personalities, accompanied by a large crowd of colourful details. Descriptions of curious material objects and everyday customs did convey some sense of how different life in the past may have been, but could not serve to support an argument.⁷ To bridge the gap between the scanty evidence available and the enormous scale of the processes involved, authors tended to treat isolated examples—whose survival often depended on the hazards of transmission—as exemplary figures. When not relying on isolated anecdotes to illustrate the *mores* of a whole age, cultural historians often sought more direct evidence for the psychological make-up of past actors in the few written texts—autobiographies, confessions, memoirs, letters—which documented explicit acts of self-reflection. The problem with such texts was not merely that they were not representative, often yielding a roll-call of the few usual suspects, from Augustine to Descartes; it is precisely by virtue of their extraordinary nature that such texts were written and preserved in the first place. They presupposed the mental capacities and psychological dispositions whose gradual emergence Elias was seeking to reconstruct. Using them amounted to looking for the coin under the lamp.

Such haphazardly collected bits and pieces could illustrate the conventional wisdom; they could be made to fit into the supposedly familiar grand outline of cultural history, but could hardly be expected to throw light of their own on the processes involved. They usually offered illustrations of what was known in advance, but did not call generally held assumptions into question. Elias, in contrast, seems to have sought to base his case on some controlled body of evidence.⁸

The solution Elias adopted was simple and ingenious, though not without its problems. He left aside most of the narrative sources and turned instead to courtesy books, containing prescriptions for polite behaviour in the elite milieus of pre-modern Europe. He took the gradual inculcation of norms of courteous behaviour as an essential—and eminently visible—aspect of a long-term process, in the course of which members of west European elites were remodelled, not by some external force, but through controlling each other and gradually imposing on themselves growing levels of self-control. Conceived in this way, changing manners became indicators for long-term directional processes—for advancing thresholds of shame, more rigorous regulation of speech and, crucially, actors' growing capacity for self-monitoring. The books on manners both functioned as instruments of this process and as precious, though indirect evidence, for its progress, for a changing habitus. Here, his debt to Freud is evident. Elias himself commented on the fact that many of the lowly materials his sources handled quite explicitly—from compulsive bathing to revelling in dirt—would be banished from polite conversation

² One thinks of Giovanni Levi's (1991) instructive discussion of transactions in a village land market.

³ In the 1936 preface to the first volume of *The process of civilization* Elias expresses his awareness that 'the idea of a psychical process extending over many generations' may appear 'hazardous and dubious', and insists that only 'a scrutiny of documents of historical experience' can show whether changes in the psychic habitus (*psychischer Habitus*) 'took place in a particular order and direction': Elias (1976a [1939]), p. lxxii; (1997a [1939]), p. 76; (1994), p. xii; note that in the English translation, the term 'habitus' has often been replaced by 'psychic structure' or 'psychic makeup'.

⁴ On Elias's particular notion of social processes, see Elias (1977, 1986). In a late interview (Elias, 2005b, p. 373) he rejected the term "figurational sociology", preferring "process sociology" as a more apt label for his approach.

⁵ The excerpts and notes are preserved among Elias's papers in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Nachlaß Norbert Elias, Notizbücher und Taschenkalender aus den Jahren 1935–1990 (cf. Fink, 1996, for a survey). In the notebooks, some of Elias's book requests from the library of the British Museum are also preserved. On 16 April 1936, for instance, he ordered Henri Dupin, *La courtoisie au moyen age* (Dupin, 1931). I must emphasize, however, that no systematic study of Elias's research notebooks has been undertaken for this paper. On the circumstances of Elias's work in the period, see Elias (2005a), esp. pp. 248–258; Karger (1977).

⁶ Some prominent examples, issued in several editions: Schultz (1879); Franklin (1887–1889), in several volumes, followed most notably by Franklin (1908); Rudeck (1897); Quennell & Quennell (1918)—all of them quoted by Elias. On the German variant of cultural history in this period, see Haas (1994); Schleier (2003).

⁷ See, for instance, Elias's remark on the difference between the handling of data on manners in older works as curiosities and his own approach: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 184; (1997a [1939]), p. 276 (with n. 65); (1994), p. 112 (with n. 66).

⁸ See his characterization of the evidence and its role in controlling and revising his hypotheses in the 1936 preface: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. lxxiii; (1997), p. 77; (1994), p. xii. In the introduction to the 1968 edition, he stresses that the task of the first volume of *The process of civilization* is to address the question of whether the hypothesis of long-term change in the affect-and-control structures 'based on scattered observations' can be confirmed 'by reliable evidence' and compares the role of the procedures adopted to that of experiment in the physical sciences: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. ix; (1997a [1939]), p. 11; (1994), p. 182.

and recur as dreams and repressed fantasies on the psychoanalyst's couch.⁹

This move has often been commented upon. It gave handkerchiefs, forks, knives, gestures of sneezing and ways of spitting a new status; they became part of an overall process of change and began to talk, to tell a history; I shall come back to this later. Elias's other methodological move, however, has often been ignored—and, if noticed obliquely, met with incomprehension and critique. Elias may have contributed to subsequent misunderstandings of his procedure by failing to present it explicitly. Yet I do believe that the consistency with which he carried out his research strategy, the unmistakable break with existing modes of inquiry, and some of his later pronouncements all indicate that this was a conscious, deliberate move. The following account is therefore crucially based on a reconstruction of what he was doing and only to a lesser extent on his few explicit pronouncements.¹⁰

Given Elias's assumption that growing control of one's drives can be read off from the minute gestures of polite behaviour, it was only natural for him to look into conduct books. He thus came up with a corpus consisting of highly repetitive prescriptive texts written between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries. But in dealing with them, Elias seemed to ignore the canons of historical interpretation. Instead of paying close attention to each text—to its authors and their intentions, to the circumstances of its composition, its audience and circulation,¹¹ he broke the courtesy books into relatively short segments, each dealing with a particular aspect of behaviour—blowing one's nose, for instance, or drinking at the table. He arranged the fragments in strict chronological order to form series, and rather than interpreting each text, he focused on its relative position within the series. The specific meaning of each single text taken by itself counted less than the difference between each element of the series and the ones preceding or following it.¹² Elias was not interpreting single texts and their particular meanings; he was in fact analyzing a discourse.¹³

This was a consequential move. It enabled Elias, for instance, to identify unexpected relations of equivalence or substitution among unrelated elements in the corpus. One could notice, for instance, how the opposition between courtiers and rustics is gradually replaced by that between civilized and wild, and then transformed into one between adults and children. The position of those transgressing the code of courtliness was first occupied by 'rustics', the socially excluded 'wild men', then by not-yet-civilized children, constructed as natural objects of domestication efforts. This implied more than a different image of childhood. Whereas, in earlier times, courtliness was expected from adults alone, with a social

demarcation line between civilized and non-civilized that opposed courtiers to 'rustics', by the early modern period, the shift from rustics to children seemed to indicate that codes of polite behaviour were beginning to be imposed during early childhood. It was only in the early modern period, Elias concluded, that families came to assume the role of inculcating rules of 'good behaviour' early in life, with far-reaching consequences for family life, the internalization of self-restraint, and children's psychological make-up. Parents hence found themselves in the position of 'the (often inadequate) instruments, the primary agents of conditioning', and the family, in a striking formulation, became the 'primary and dominant production site for the suppression of "drives"'.¹⁴ None of the courtesy books gave direct evidence of such transformations, nor could narrative sources easily yield such hypotheses; it was the shifting positions of elements within the series that suggested deeper structural change.¹⁵

The series also made it possible for Elias to perceive shifts in the location of the monitoring instance from external control to self-restraint, as arguments for polite behaviour seemed to shift from pointing out unfavourable social consequences—incurring shame—to invocations of internal guilt. This was crucial for Elias's argument that stable self-control was a result of a process of internalizing external social censorship. Similarly, Elias could observe within his series how rules for referring to bodily functions changed, direct designations being replaced by euphemisms and indirect allusions. All this, I would suggest, is discourse analysis *avant la lettre*. Elias was consistently ignoring particular authors and their intentions in given texts and focusing on detecting underlying regularities and gradual shifts in a relatively homogeneous textual corpus.

But the most important role the series was to perform in Elias's method was to help construct what he termed 'the curve of civilization'. From the succession of textual fragments, all of them belonging to a single discourse of courtly conduct, the movement of civilization was to emerge. Occasionally he described his task as tracing 'the movement, the curve of development'.¹⁶ It was essential for Elias's argument that changing habits in different domains, even though their precise dating and actual distribution remained hard to assess, had a clear overall direction; they were not a heterogeneous list of unrelated rules of behaviour, but an accumulation of new constraints and rules of politeness that presupposed basic compliance with earlier ones. Hence, a pattern of structured change was to emerge: the gradual refinement of behaviour, the growing distance from bodily needs, increasing levels of self-control.¹⁷ The curve did not represent what actually happened, in-

⁹ Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 248–249; (1997a [1939]), pp. 341–342; (1994), pp. 149, 249 n. 81.

¹⁰ The key passages can be found at the end of Part II, Section 3 of the first volume of *The process of civilization*, as Elias moves from a lengthy discussion of Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium libellus* to analysis of the series of quotes from books on manners: Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 102–109; (1997a [1939]), pp. 194–201; (1994), pp. 63–67.

¹¹ The only exception seems to be Erasmus, whose *De civilitate* is accorded special attention by Elias; yet here as well, critique abounds. See Knox (1995).

¹² Some earlier historical works that Elias relied upon included precious collections of documents, but they were not treated as series (e.g., Alfred Franklin's *La civilité* (1908); Elias (1997), p. 413 n. 65; (1994), p. 247 n. 66). A more direct precursor, to which Elias may have owed more than he admits, may have been Arthur Denecke (1892); see esp. Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 317–318 n. 34; (1997a [1939]), pp. 410–411 n. 34; (1994), pp. 246–246 n. 34.

¹³ See Schöttler (1995).

¹⁴ Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 186, 190–191; (1997a [1939]), pp. 277, 282; (1994), pp. 112, 115 (translation modified).

¹⁵ Elias's original contributions to the history of childhood and the family have often escaped notice. See, for instance, Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 186–187, 191–193, 228–230, 236–242, 245–250, 259–261; (1997a), pp. 277–278, 282–283, 321–323, 329–335, 338–343, 352–355; (1994), pp. 112–113, 115–116, 137–138, 141–144, 147–150, 154–155. Elias mentions the materials he collected for a projected history of the family, childhood and the relations between the sexes: Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Nachlaß Norbert Elias, A 1000–1002; Elias (1976b [1939]), p. 401; (1976b [1939]), p. 412; (1994), pp. 494–495. His observations on children's upbringing and parents' helplessness and embarrassment, his keen awareness of the psychic costs of normal socialization and its ambivalence are not grounded, I suggest, in reading psychoanalytic and educational literature, but are intimately related to his experience in the Zionist youth movement *Blau-Weiss*—before renouncing active political engagement and turning to scholarship. In later years he was careful not to mention his political involvement, passing over in silence his earlier nationalist commitment. For an instructive account, see Hackeschmidt (1997a,b); note Elias's concealed allusion to his involvement in the autobiographical interview he gave toward the end of his life: Elias, (2005b), p. 208.

¹⁶ Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 75; (1997a [1939]), p. 167; (1994), p. 48 (translation modified). Besides recurring references to 'the curve of civilization', Elias also speaks of a 'curve of development' or a 'curve of movement', a 'transformation curve'. See, for instance, Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 328–329 nn. 119, 143, 145, 163, 169, 181, 184; (1997a [1939]), pp. 420–422 nn. 119, 235, 237, 255, 261, 273, 276; (1994), pp. 252–253 nn. 124, 87, 88, 99, 103, 110, 112.

¹⁷ The curve is the actual result of the analysis of the series and hence often invoked at the end of each section. Elias seems to assume it can be at least partly generalized; other forms of behaviour—not only eating, he writes, but speaking and thinking as well—would basically be moulded similarly, though 'with significant differences in the timing and structure of the movement curves': Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 145; (1997), p. 237; (1994), p. 88 (translation modified); for an insight critique, see Baumann (1996).

stances of actual behaviour in specific moments in time; it stood for a changing standard of behaviour, out of which one could abstract changing levels of self-restraint. The curve of civilization was the empirical foundation for the second volume of *The process of civilization*, in which Elias sought to offer an explanatory model linking societal change (the intensification of interdependence, the rise of central powers, and so on) to the structural transformation of people's psychic makeup.

How important the series was for the construction of the curve of civilization can be seen quite clearly, I believe, by comparing the results Elias achieved in cases where he was able to construct a series by isolating short textual segments dealing with a particular sort of behaviour—sneezing, serving meat at the table or using the fork—with those in which there was no reasonable way to do so. Such was the case in two crucial domains—violence and the relationship between the sexes.¹⁸ There was no lack of evidence; but in both instances, Elias was dealing with complex social relationships that could not be reduced to forms of individual conduct. Interaction could not be successfully reduced to behaviour.¹⁹ Elias was therefore unable to extract from the available evidence isolated units, simple fragments that could be ordered to form a chronological series. The result was very different from the one he obtained in previous sections of his book: instead of a complex curve with a changing, variable pace ('slight preparatory shifts', then 'a certain climax', followed by 'relatively rapid movement' and stabilization 'with a very slow movement'),²⁰ he resorted to a simple opposition between "then" and "now", between pre-modern lack of control and wild outbursts of violence, and modern restraint and pacification, between pre-modern uninhibited sexuality and modern shame.²¹ The two opposed poles could only be connected by an imagined line of development. The resulting image of sexuality and violence hence reproduces the commonplaces of the cultural history of the period—which, in fact, were often taken up uncritically even by the most innovative social historians of the pre-war period.²² It comes perhaps as no surprise, then, that these are also the most well-known chapters of *The process of civilization*, but arguably also the less convincing ones.

It is not easy to find parallels or possible sources of inspiration for Elias's attempt to construct the 'curve of civilization'. During the years of hyperinflation following the First World War, Elias took over the family firm (1922–1924); he may thus have gained closer knowledge of the use of curves to represent economic processes.²³ A slightly more likely explanation may be some familiarity with the use of curves to represent physiological processes, gained

during Elias's early formation in medicine at the University of Breslau.²⁴ But the attempt to represent a complex historical process as a curve is truly intriguing, and very few parallels can be found. In his *Pandaemonium*, Humphrey Jennings (1907–1950), resorted to a similar device. The book consists of a series of texts from 1660 to 1886, arranged thematically and chronologically in order to give a sense of the way the introduction of machines was perceived by contemporaries. The work remained unfinished, however, and the texts were left without further analysis.²⁵ It is not accidental, I believe, that the only parallels I have come across until now—with more than a little help from my friends—all pertain to the history of science and technology, as in the work of Felix Auerbach (1856–1933), who experimented with plotting the history of modern physics by drawing a curve.²⁶ A late and more sophisticated parallel can be found in Joseph Needham's comparative study of science and civilization in China. Needham produced complex criteria for identifying crucial points of transformation ('transcendent' and 'fusion' points) and the curve he came up with was expected to reveal not only the respective development of scientific traditions but also their contacts and appropriation (Fig. 1).²⁷

In its time, however, Elias's 'curve of civilization' seems to have been quite unique both in terms of the principles underlying its construction and of what it purported to represent. The series on which it was based was improvised, uneven, reflecting the uneven distribution of the available sources. In addition, the curve, unlike those constructed by pioneer economic historians, was based not on quantitative data, but on a textual series. Hence, its construction implied abstracting indicators from particular texts—for example, a growing level of self-control, a widening distance from bodily functions, a rising threshold of shame, and so on.

Even more intriguing, I believe, is what the curve was supposed to convey. It did not claim to represent what happened. It did not connect a series of past states, each of them reconstructed with some precision. The curve of civilization did not tell you how one was actually supposed to blow one's nose in, say, 1435, or any other specific time; this was of secondary importance. The curve was not a faithful representation of the situation in particular points in time; it was not a tableau of past mores. Rather, when seen as a whole, the general *direction* of the movement—its vector—was supposed to emerge, and sometimes also its *pace*, when standards of conduct seem to have changed rapidly or to have become relatively stable.²⁸ Elias's 'curve of civilization' did not claim to represent particular, datable states in the past—but *movement* itself, invisible change, *a process*. This

¹⁸ Elias (1976a [1939]), pp. 230–283; (1997a [1939]), pp. 324–376; (1994), pp. 138–168. Elias planned to write a book on the relationship of the sexes, and his papers indeed contain notes and materials he had collected for such a project. He may have realized while working on the last sections of the book that the topic requires a different sort of approach. At one point he seems to be aware that the 'curve of civilization' is less detailed in this case (1976a, p. 247; 1997a, p. 340; 1994, p. 148). When he does try to sketch the curve by analogy (1976a, p. 258; 1997a, p. 351; 1994, p. 154), the result remains strikingly vague. This, however, not only reflects Elias's difficulties with the sources, but the fact that his civilized man has no gender—or rather, is implicitly assumed to be a man. When Elias tries to extend his argument to women, it almost falls apart, and while he is trying to rescue the 'curve of civilization', it loses any clear direction (Algazi, 2007 [2000]), pp. 110–112).

¹⁹ One may certainly ask whether in other cases as well politeness could be reduced to individual behaviour, ignoring its embeddedness in social interactions: in other words, whether acting politely was a simple case of following a rule, or rather better conceived strategically as a move within complex social situations.

²⁰ Elias (1994), pp. 86–87.

²¹ In both the chapters on the relationship between the sexes and violence, Elias relies very heavily on secondary literature, interspersing his account with colourful examples that make for vivid contrasts, e.g. between sixteenth-century humanists' texts and nineteenth-century treatises on education (1976a [1939], pp. 230–243; 1997a [1939], pp. 324–336; 1994, pp. 138–145, 148).

²² See, for instance, Rudeck (1897); for an illuminating critique of Marc Bloch's depiction of medieval emotional outbursts, see esp. White (1998).

²³ Tanner (2002), pp. 129–158; see also Gerhard et al. (2001). It seems unlikely that Elias was familiar with Marxist attempts to push analysis beyond the observation of economic cycles to trace a 'curve of development' of complex social formations, as in Leon Trotsky's 1923 text, 'The curve of capitalist development', translated later into English (Trotsky, 1941).

²⁴ On the use of the graphic method in the life sciences, see de Chadarevian (1993), Brain (2008), and n. 47 below.

²⁵ Jennings (1985).

²⁶ Auerbach (1923), pp. 13, 110, relying on his earlier book *Physik in graphischen Darstellungen* (1912); see Sibum (2006). Note that in his review of the book, Friedrich Dannemann (1924) noted the unusual attempt to present the history of a constant by a curve. I would like to thank Otto Sibum, who discusses Auerbach's work in the first chapter of his forthcoming book, for the reference and enlightening discussions of Auerbach's work and its context. Bob Brain (2008) suggestively constructs the relevant intellectual contexts in his discussion of the graphic method.

²⁷ Needham (1970), p. 414.

²⁸ It is the 'overall shape [Gestalt] of the curve' that is of paramount importance, its pace and direction: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 142; (1997a [1939]), p. 233; (1994), p. 86; similarly (1976a), p. lxxii; (1997a [1939]), p. 76; (1994), p. xii, and *passim*.

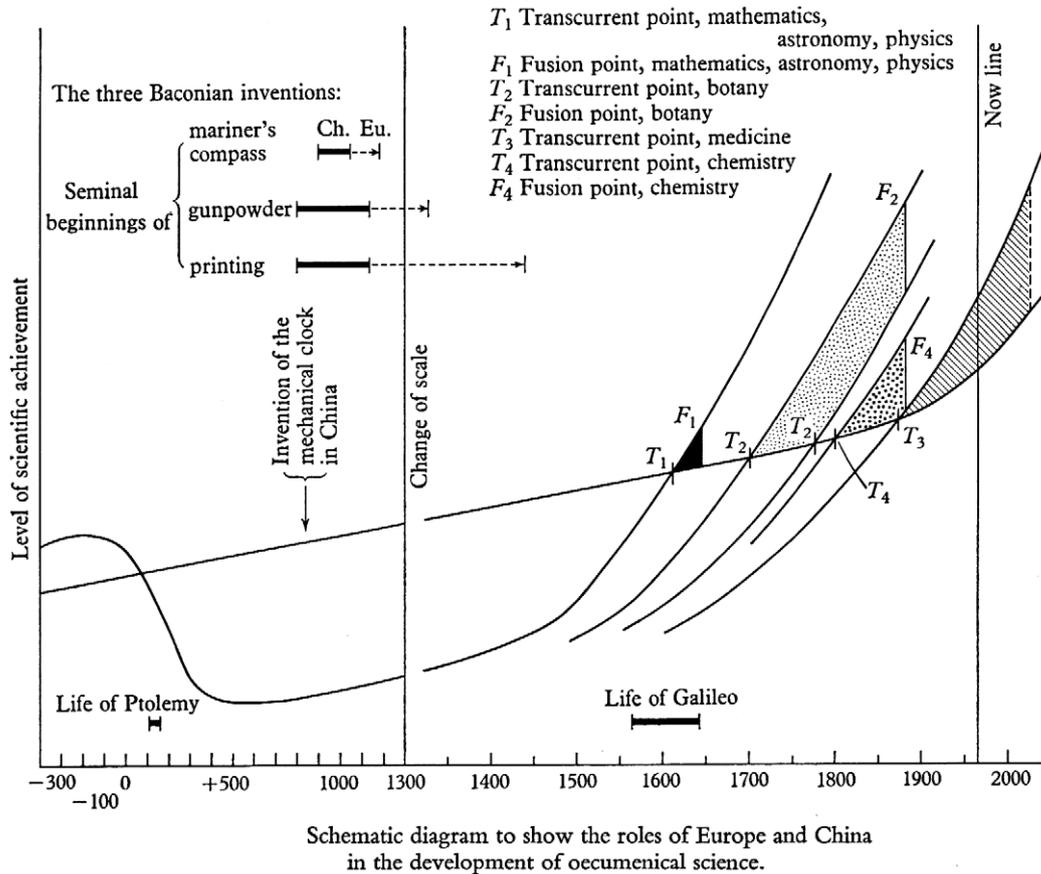


Fig. 1. From Needham (1970), p. 414; used with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

was no doubt a novel concept of historical representation. This is certainly in line with the basic thrust of Elias's approach, evident in what he called the "dynamization of static concepts" (such as civilization, or democracy) and in his clear preference for conceiving social reality primarily in terms of processes, not as a succession of static situations.²⁹ Still, this move calls for some explanation, or at least an attempted contextualization.

Before offering some hypotheses on this, let me draw attention to some of the limitations of Elias's approach. There was a price to be paid for both the de-contextualization of the texts to be positioned as items in a series, and the radical abstraction involved in their treatment, without which they could not be taken as indicators of levels of self-control or changing thresholds of shame. Both operations may have been a precondition for representing invisible slow movement, for constructing the curve—but they also formed an obstacle to its explanation.

Without looking at particular social situations and how actors handled them, the practical logic of actors' situated actions would disappear from view; one would see neither why historical actors adopted specific norms of conduct in particular situations, nor how they appropriated them in changing contexts. That is, overall change would become discernible, but its situation-bound causes and consequences would be lost from view. The same holds for

seeming failures to realize norms of conduct: when abstracting conduct from social situations, all cases of non-compliance with norms of courtly conduct would look alike—as instances of incomplete internalization of the norms. The case of the Marquise de Châtelet (1706–1749), for instance, showing herself naked to her servant while bathing, throwing him into confusion, was taken by Elias to indicate a low threshold of shame in the presence of inferiors in the mid eighteenth century. But a harder look at the evidence reveals that rather than showing 'exactly ... the stage of the shame-feeling' common in the period when conceiving the incident in terms of compliance with norms governing nakedness, nudity was actually uncommon, so that the Marquise's behaviour should rather be understood as a situated social strategy, a matter of seduction and display of power.³⁰ Thus, without re-embedding the texts in their particular contexts and looking closely at the circumstances of actors' behaviour, Elias cannot distinguish between code and practice, between inability to comply with norms of conduct and calculated transgressions that presuppose its internalization. Situated social strategies are hence perceived as instances of 'behaviour', the active appropriation of social codes is inadvertently reduced to following a rule, and the movement of history is left without moving and moved actors. Rather than combining the construction of a series with situation analysis³¹—although he occasionally

²⁹ Explaining the approach underlying *The process of civilization*, Elias wrote in the preface to the 1936 edition that it should make it possible to overcome 'statism', which tends to express historical movements through motionless states, in order to uncover 'the order underlying historical changes': Elias (1976a [1939]), p. lxxvii; (1997a [1939]), p. 81; (1994), pp. xiv–xv; italics Elias's. The point is elaborated in the introduction to the 1968 revised edition: 'A structured sequence of continuous change serves here as the frame of reference for investigating states located at particular points in time. In prevailing sociological opinion, conversely, social situations, treated as if they normally existed in a state of rest, serve as the frame of reference for all change'. Elias (1976a [1939]), p. xxi; (1997a [1939]), p. 23; (1994), p. 189.

³⁰ Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 188; (1997a [1939]), p. 279; (1994), p. 113. We owe this point to Hans Peter Duerr (1988), pp. 242–251. On the implications of Elias's view of forms of politeness in terms of following rules rather than as situated strategies, see Algazi (2007 [2000]), pp. 107–109.

³¹ See Mitchell (1983).

offered extended interpretations of single passages—Elias chiefly sought to explain the historical transformation he made visible in the first volume of *The process of civilization* by correlating it with large-scale societal change; but correlations, in this case as well, can only offer imperfect, and often deceptive clues for causal relations.

2.

Subsequent historians have often rightly questioned the accuracy of single images of past states invoked in the pages of *The process of civilization*. But they seem to have misunderstood their meaning, for these were in fact *motion pictures*. Indeed, I would argue that at the heart of Elias's methodology lies the experience of cinema—of the representation of movement through the quick succession of images, often at the cost of the faithful representation of motionless individual states. 'The cinema', it was widely held, 'represents the world in its continuous mobility'.³² The essence of film, wrote Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) in 1936, is 'the succession of image series' that captures movement.³³ This is a commonplace often repeated until the 1930s and embedded in a lively discussion on the potentialities of cinema.

In 1936, in the preface to the first volume of *The process of civilization*, Elias explicitly described his work in these terms:

In the second chapter, you will find some series of examples [*Beispielreihen*]. They serve as a sort of accelerated motion device [*Zeitraffer*]. In the space of a few pages, you can see how in the course of centuries the standard of behaviour on the same occasion very gradually shifts in a specific direction.³⁴

Here Elias is explaining how to read the series he is about to present. He often uses the terms 'series of images' (*Bilderreihe*) to refer to his historical evidence, and occasionally speaks about 'seeing' people at the table or going to bed.³⁵ He has often been taken to task for doing so: the texts certainly do not offer us faithful images of historical situations; they are far from being transparent windows into the past. But Elias is asking his readers here not to gaze at each of the texts or to try to look through them, but to 'see them together' (*Zusammensehen*) synthetically, so that by 'fusing them' readers might form 'an image of a more or less directional movement'. It is only then that the curve will reveal itself.³⁶ Elias's directives for his readers are likely to have been inspired by the notion that the "persistence of vision" and the resulting "fusion" of the separate images explain the illusion of movement in motion pictures.³⁷ The social mechanism of standardization of polite behaviour, he writes

elsewhere, can be seen in outline when we 'look at the image series as a whole'.³⁸ Elias seems to be convinced that he can make invisible processes visible by using texts as a series of images, hoping that their quick succession will make the *process* visible.

Elias's references to image series and over-cranking are more than turns of phrase; he was seriously interested in visualization. In Frankfurt he had been unofficial supervisor of Gisèle Freund's pioneering dissertation on the history of photography.³⁹ Among his unpublished papers, I came across two unpublished sketches for short animated films.⁴⁰ Neither is his invocation of cinema an isolated metaphor, for it occurs again in another key passage. Having opened his discussion of the historical formation of norms of civilized behaviour with a rather traditional historical interpretation of key texts, such as Erasmus's *De civilitate*, Elias is about to introduce the first series of examples of table manners. He seems to be quite aware of the limitations of the sort of interpretation he has offered until this point: 'In observing a single stage', he writes, 'we lack a sure measure. What is accidental fluctuation? When and where is something advancing? When is something falling behind?' And most crucially for his project: 'Are we really concerned with a change in a definite direction?' Is European society 'really . . . slowly moving'?

It is not very easy to make this movement clearly visible precisely because it takes place so slowly—in very small steps, as it were—and because it also shows manifold fluctuations, following smaller and larger curves. It clearly does not suffice to consider in isolation each single stage to which this or that statement on customs and manners bears witness. We must attempt to see movement itself, or at least a large segment of it, as a whole, as if with an accelerated motion device [*wie mit einem Zeitraffer*]. Images must be placed next to each other in a series to see the process—from one particular aspect—as a whole: the gradual transformation of modes of behaviour and emotional states, the advancement of the threshold of aversion.⁴¹

Elias would resort to the principles of cinematic representation to explain his method years later. In 1980, dealing with changing figurations of parent–child relationships, he would take up the same point again. To begin with, he writes, one needs to form an image (*Bild*) of the line of development (*Entwicklungslinie*)—a living image (*ein lebendiges Bild*) of the difference between past relationships and current ones. In order to do this he would use, as he had done in the past in other cases, a series of samples:

Taken by itself, each one of them can be misunderstood as a description of a [past] state. But if you perceive them as stills

³² Epstein (1988b [1930]), p. 64.

³³ Panofsky (1995), based on a talk in Princeton first published in 1936. On Panofsky's film essay, see Prange (1994); Levin (1996). It is easy to provide further parallels; see, for instance, Georg Lukács (1992 [1911]), p. 302: 'Zeitlichkeit und Fluß des "Kino" sind aber ganz rein und ungetrübt: das Wesen des "Kino" ist die Bewegung an sich, die ewige Veränderlichkeit, der nie ruhende Wechsel der Dinge'.

³⁴ 'Man findet in dem zweiten Kapitel eine Anzahl von Beispielreihen. Sie dienen als eine Art von Zeitraffer. Man sieht hier auf wenige Seiten, wie sich durch die Jahrhunderte hin bei immer den gleichen Gelegenheiten ganz allmählich der Standard des menschlichen Verhaltens in einer bestimmten Richtung verschiebt'. Elias (1976a [1939]), p. lxxiii; (1997 a [1939]), p. 77; (1994), p. xii (translation modified).

³⁵ Elias (1976a [1939]), p. lxxiii; (1997a [1939]), p. 77; (1994), p. xii.

³⁶ Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 184; (1997a [1939]), p. 276; (1994), p. 112.

³⁷ For a review of the theories, see Anderson & Anderson (1980); Nicholas & Lederman (1980); see also Anderson & Anderson (1993).

³⁸ Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 144; (1997a [1939]), p. 236; (1994), p. 88.

³⁹ See Freund's dissertation (1936), completed in Parisian exile and often re-edited since, and her remarks on Elias's role as a teacher (1977).

⁴⁰ Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Nachlaß Norbert Elias, A 1522–1523. The first among the two (A 1522), invoking a powerful nightmarish image of humans being moved about by forces beyond their control, is titled 'The deadly game' (*Das tödliche Spiel*). It is a one-page English typescript; to judge by its outward appearance and language, it may have been written during Elias's first years in England, perhaps in the late thirties or early forties. Elias conceived it as a film in colour and his short description includes instructions for camera movements. The second, a seven-page outline, 'Puzzle in paradise' (A 1523), is specifically described by Elias as a project for an animated film.

⁴¹ 'Es ist nicht ganz leicht, diese Bewegung klar und anschaulich sichtbar zu machen, gerade weil sie sich so langsam und gleichsam in ganz kleinen Schritten, weil sie sich überdies mit mannigfachen Schwankungen, in kleineren und größeren Kurven vollzieht. Offenbar genügt es nicht, jede einzelne Stufe, von der diese oder jene Mitteilung über den Stand der Gewohnheiten und Manieren uns Zeugnis ablegt, für sich zu betrachten. Man muß versuchen, die Bewegung selbst oder wenigstens einen größeren Abschnitt von ihr, wie mit einem Zeitraffer, als Ganzes zu überblicken. Man muß Bild an Bild reihen, um von einer bestimmten Seite her den Prozeß, die allmähliche Verwandlung der Verhaltensweisen und der Affektlage, das Vorrücken der Peinlichkeitsschwelle im Zusammenhang zu übersehen'. Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 108; (1997a [1939]), p. 200; (1994), p. 67 (translation modified); the phrase 'wie mit einem Zeitraffer' is rendered as 'to see movement . . . as if speeded up'. The phrase can be traced in Elias's notebook of March 1936: 'Hier läßt sich in der Tat Bild an Bild reihen und den Prozeß in Längsschnitt als ganzen sichtbar machen'. (Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Nachlaß Norbert Elias, 993, A4).

in a movie, as fragments (*Ausschnitte*) of a process, then with their help one can easily see before one's eyes the broad line of the development.⁴²

Cinema is here not a metaphor invoked in order to describe historical practice, but is constitutive of a different way of seeing and an unusual notion of representation that seems to be connected to perceptions of cinema and its potential for representing movement that were prevalent at the period. By the mid twenties, for instance, German avant-garde photographers were trying their hand at photomontage and applying some cinematic routines. One spoke about 'a new art of seeing' termed 'the new vision' (*Das neue Sehen*).⁴³ Hobby photographers, for their part, began to shoot photo series, to make serial portraits of themselves or others making faces or gesticulating.⁴⁴ It is hard, however, to find historians taking up the challenge or discussing it in a way reminiscent of Elias. One can easily point out the famous passage in Marc Bloch's *The historian's craft*, in which he used the metaphor of rolling back the film in order to describe the reconstruction of an effaced phase of the past.⁴⁵ But it is rather single photographs—the remaining traces—that Bloch set out to analyze in order to reconstruct the earliest image available: nothing like Elias's use of cinema in order to create an image of an invisible process. (Fernand Braudel, for his part, would buy an old movie-camera in the late twenties—only in order to make copies of archival documents; he would project them on the wall with a magic lantern.)⁴⁶

Yet while I have not been able to trace historians who discussed the potential challenge for their craft posed by cinema in a manner roughly comparable to Elias, film-makers, critics and artists explored intensively the new possibilities it seemed to open. 'During the period of the swift reorganization and acceleration of the industry following the First World War', writes film historian Annette Michelson,

unprecedented hopes for both still and motion-picture photography crystallized in an early theoretical literature. Prior to the introduction of sound, converging expectations and achievements intimated that cinema was a uniquely privileged mode of analytic investigation, an epistemological instrument of radically new power.⁴⁷

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), Jean Epstein (1897–1953) and Dziga Vertov (1896–1954), among others, all referred to the uses of film technology in scientific experiments to underpin their claims that exploring 'the technological and filmic specificities of the apparatus' would lead 'to the realization of its fullest potential'.⁴⁸ Epstein insisted that cinema was 'a particular form of knowing': 'needing to do more than just see, man augmented the microscopic and telescopic apparatuses with the cinematic apparatus, creating something other than the eye'.⁴⁹ Vertov called his revolutionary concept of cinema "Kino-Eye"; 'Kino-Eye', he wrote in 1924, in one of his early manifestos, 'is understood as "that which the eye doesn't see", as the microscope and telescope of time', as 'the possibility of making the invisible visible'.⁵⁰ Vertov defined his film, *The man with the camera* (1929) as a 'complex experiment'. His film, he wrote in a short essay published in the Berlin-based journal *Die Weltbühne*, 'seeks to create visual links between phenomena widely scattered in time. It creates the possibility of showing processes of life in any tempo that usually remains hidden to the human eye'.⁵¹

Later that year, and on the pages of the very same journal, Harry Kahn (1883–1970) imagined what a great film director could do: with a historical accelerated motion device (*mit einem historischen Zeitraffer*) he would be able to 'capture long-term economic and social process and make them comprehensible by reducing them to a small set of monumental image-lines'.⁵² Here, I believe, we come closest to Elias's methodological innovation: treating texts as parts of a developing discourse, creating a series that could represent the direction and structure of long-term change and, through the succession of images, make the slow movement of history visible. Still, historians could not vie with the use of cinema in the biological and physical sciences.⁵³ No one came closer to playfully experimenting with film-making in order to make modern physics comprehensible than the theoretical physicist Max Born (1882–1970), who included in his influential book *The restless universe* (1935) a flip-book, asking his readers to run the little films as they absorbed the arguments, in order to see some of the 'inner secrets' of the Universe for themselves.⁵⁴

Yet, even in its own terms, Elias's appropriation of 'the graphic method' and cinema to rethink the problem of movement in his-

⁴² Elias deliberately used the American term "movie" to invoke the notion of movement, but the quotation marks and the spelling mistake in the published German version indicate how unexpected such a reference was felt to be in the context he used them: 'Ich bediene mich, wie ich es schon in anderen Fällen getan habe, einer Reihe von Stichproben. Für sich betrachtet, kann jede von ihnen als Beschreibung eines Zustands mißverstanden werden. Aber wenn man sie als "stills" eines "movy" [sic!] (Films), als Ausschnitte eines Prozesses wahrnimmt, dann ist es nicht schwer, mit ihrer Hilfe die große Linie der Entwicklung vor sich zu sehen'. Elias (1980), pp. 12–13; (1998), p. 192 (translation modified).

⁴³ See Rainer (1991).

⁴⁴ Starl (1995), pp. 86–88.

⁴⁵ 'Ici comme ailleurs, c'est un changement que l'historien veut saisir. Mais, dans le film qu'il considère, seule la dernière pellicule est intacte. Pour reconstituer les traits brisés des autres, force a été de dérouler, d'abord, la bobine en sens inverse des prises de vue'. Bloch (1993 [1949]), p. 97; see also Bloch (1988 [1931]), p. 51. Ulrich Raulff (1995), pp. 99–112, has perceptively placed Bloch's remarks in the context of the use of aerial photos in the First World War, for both retrievably destroying and documenting the patterns of western Europe's rural landscape.

⁴⁶ Braudel (1972), pp. 451–452.

⁴⁷ Michelson in Vertov (1984), p. xlii.

⁴⁸ Moholy-Nagy, Epstein, and Vertov are all contemporaries of Elias (born in 1897). Like Elias, Vertov had also studied medicine; it was during his studies at St Petersburg in 1916 and 1917 that he began experimenting with sound recording and assemblage, before turning to film. Epstein, like Elias, studied medicine and philosophy, before eventually turning to cinema. Humphrey Jennings, finally, author of the experimental *Pandaemonium*, was known primarily as a documentary film-maker.

⁴⁹ Epstein (1988b [1930]), p. 64; for the views of the French "cinema impressionists", see Barnard (2000).

⁵⁰ Vertov (1984), p. 41.

⁵¹ "Der Mann mit der Kamera" will die Überwindung der Zeit, die visuelle Verbindung zwischen zeitlich weit voneinander getrennten Erscheinungen. Er gibt die Möglichkeit, Lebensprozesse in einem beliebigen, dem menschlichen Auge verschlossenen Tempo des Zeitablaufs zu sehen'. Vertov (1929), p. 140; elsewhere Vertov (1984), p. 88, used very similar expressions to explain what Kino-Eye was about. On Vertov's presence in Germany, see Tode (1995).

⁵² 'Man könnte sich einen großen Regisseur denken, der mit diesem Thema, wie mit einem historischen Zeitraffer, langwierige wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Prozesse umgriffe und begreiflich machte, indem er es auf wenige monumentale Bildlinien brächte'. Kahn (1929), p. 851. Kahn would co-author several screenplays in the early 1930s.

⁵³ See Landecker (2005, 2006).

⁵⁴ Born wrote the book in the early thirties (the German manuscript is preserved at Edinburgh University Library). As his son, Gustav Born, later recalled (2002), p. 251, it was a doodle devised by Gustav and his friends that gave him 'the idea for the moving pictures in that book: as you flick over the pages you see gas molecules collide, radiation emitted from a hot wire, an electron moving around a nucleus, and so on'. His nephew, Otto Königsberger, came to England to illustrate the book. I am thankful to Richard Staley who drew my attention to the book and discussed it with me.

torical research had some serious limitations. Invoking the ‘curve of civilization’ repeatedly, Elias consistently refrained from giving it precise shape or actually sketching it; occasionally, he would speak of several curves without stating clearly how they were related.⁵⁵ He often wrote as if images invoked by the texts could enable direct insight into the structures of past society, and his theoretical statements, in which he often assumed a realist posture, concealed the amount of construction that went into the making of his series. In fact, Elias may have underestimated the role of montage—both in the making of his own series of images, and in cinema. Actual cinematic practice went well beyond the invocations of liveliness and movement common among intellectuals at the time. Elias shared no doubt the ‘vulgate of the intellectuals’ about the new medium; he could hardly be expected to be aware of the more radical theorizations of cinematic practice in terms of a theory of intervals among radical film-makers. Here, montage became a governing principle of all production, and comparisons with relativity theory and studies of motion were repeatedly made.⁵⁶

3.

It seemed evident to Harry Kahn that capturing grand-scale historical process required the use of monumental images. Elias, however, opted for the exceedingly small. His originality did not reside simply in moving beyond the usual time-frame of historical studies, seeking to reconstruct slow, long-term movement. His other original move consisted in locating such change in everyday gestures and the microscopic minutiae of social conduct: here, he claimed, long-term trends of self-control and refinement can be detected. He also gave the minute details of conduct—holding a glass of wine with fat fingers, blowing one’s nose with the back of one’s hand—a privileged position in the historical process itself, for he suggested that such meaningless minor gestures were the mechanism by which self-control was inculcated and self-observation rehearsed and developed. It is as if Elias decided to combine the telescope and the microscope—offering us a telescopic grand view of historical change by focusing on microscopic, fleeting gestures.

While it seems difficult to point out significant parallels for Elias’s appropriation of the cinema in rethinking historical methodology and the reconstruction of long-term processes, his interest in gestures reflected a much wider concern. Anthropologists, choreographers, social reformers and physicians, psychiatrists, graphologists, and economists—the list is by no means exhaustive—all participated in intensive discussions about bodily gestures, their implications, how to document and how to shape them. Yet in the following, I should like to focus on the role of cinema in drawing attention to the possibility of studying the history of emotions through reconstructing changing bodily motions. It is easy to see why in the 1920s and 1930s, for scholars of different backgrounds, cinema seemed to enable the documentation of minute bodily movements and everyday ways of doing things.⁵⁷ But it also made some observers aware of the historicity of gestures. The most significant relationship is not between the cinematic apparatus itself and new ways of seeing, however, but between social uses of cinema, its

popular appropriation and the scholarly study of processes of civilization.

I shall skip some circumstantial evidence, and go directly to my two main witnesses. Read in isolation, what each of them says about cinema might be considered a personal idiosyncrasy or an isolated observation. Taken together, and considering the fact that neither of them knew about the other, the convergence between their observations is remarkable and indicates, I believe, a more general phenomenon.

The first is no other than Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). His article on the techniques of the body is no doubt one of his most influential texts. It is also the one in which Mauss formulated his notion of the *habitus*—the one that remained operative in French ethnology until the mid sixties, when Bourdieu borrowed it and transformed its meaning. Mauss spoke in 1934 before the Société de Psychologie.⁵⁸ His text is structured as the quest for a concept; for years he had been assembling materials and had no way to conceptualize them:

I was well aware that walking or swimming, for example, and all sorts of things of the same type, are specific to determinate societies; that the Polynesians do not swim as we do, that my generation did not swim as the present generation does. But what social phenomena did these represent?

Mauss then sketches the occasions on which the notion of body techniques began to emerge. In 1898, he relates, he met the author of the article on swimming in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, who revealed to him ‘the historical ethnographical interest of the question’. Subsequently, Mauss noticed how different the modern way of swimming was from the one he himself had learned in the past. During the Great War he noticed that digging techniques were culture-specific: English soldiers could not use French spades. Also, the English were not capable of marching the French way; the gait was different. In vain they tried to march the English way to a French rhythm. But these, he adds, were only first approaches to the subject. They all seem to have occurred in contexts in which Mauss was observing himself or other men, and could easily be subsumed as another variation on the old theme of French–English differences. But the crucial scene was yet to come, after the Great War. ‘A kind of revelation’, he writes, ‘came to me in hospital’:

I was ill in New York. I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. I had the time to think about it. At last I realized that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they too were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions [*modes de marcher*] had begun to arrive over here, thanks to the cinema. This was an idea I could generalise. The positions of the arms and hands while walking form a social idiosyncrasy; they are not simply a product of some purely individual, almost completely psychological, arrangements and mechanisms. For example: I think I can also recognise a girl who had been raised in a convent. In general, she will walk with her fists closed. And I can still remember my third-form teacher shouting at me: ‘Idiot! Why do you walk

⁵⁵ See Patrick Boucheron’s (1998) illuminating remarks on historians’ use of maps—and why they keep evoking them without actually drawing them. Elias notes the complexity of actual movement of history; when it is viewed closely, he admits, one would detect ‘the most diverse crisscross movements, shifts and spurts’, but it is ‘the general trend’ he was interested in: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 256; (1997a [1939]), p. 349; (1994), p. 153. Faced with a text that does not easily fit the expected curve, he asks readers to consider historical movement ‘in its full multilayered polyphony’, but immediately he trims down this suggestive notion of polyphony by saying that instead of a single line of development, we have ‘a kind of fugue with a succession of related movement-motifs on different levels’—each social layer presumably condemned to repeat, with variations, the same motif: Elias (1976a [1939]), p. 124; (1997a [1939]), p. 216; (1994), p. 76; see also (1976b), p. 96; (1976b [1939]), p. 105; (1994), p. 319.

⁵⁶ Michelson (1992). On historians’ reluctance to engage with the possibilities of rethinking their craft opened up by cinema, see Barta (1988).

⁵⁷ For some instructive examples, see Schwartz (1992); Gordon (2001); Amad (2001); Grimshaw (2001), Pt I.

⁵⁸ The lecture was delivered in the afternoon of 17 May 1934, and published in 1936: Mauss (1950 [1936]). Ben Brewster’s English translation (Mauss 1979), followed here, also usefully identifies some of the oblique references in the French original.

around the whole time with your hands flapping wide open?' Thus there exists education in walking, too.⁵⁹

In Mauss's retrospective account, it is a specific, gendered gaze that brought the concept of body techniques into being. It is not that of a man observing himself or his fellow men, but that of a man lying passive, due to imposed leisure, watching the gait of female nurses and having scholarly thoughts. Also, whereas earlier Mauss expected to find sameness and discovered difference—between us and them, between the customs of his youth and current practices—now the unexpected observation consists precisely in observing an unexplained similarity of gait—which brings him immediately to the cultural force that disseminates bodily postures and ways of moving: cinema. As his examples show, Mauss did not need the experience of cinema to discover the historicity of bodily gestures. What cinema crucially added, according to his own account, was the suggestion that this was a case of documented cultural transmission—hence, the object could be studied—and that here was a case of swift change, of rapid appropriation—hence the proof that body techniques were, in Mauss's words, something eminently social. Popular appropriation turned his attention to institutional, more traditional modes of inculcating gestures—in the convent and the school, and hence to education and tradition in general.

As early as 1930, in his paper on the notion of civilization, Mauss remarked that a new mode of communicating tradition had now come into being—the cinema—yet at the time, he commented only on the possibilities it opened for scholarly documentation, not on its social role.⁶⁰ Now, with the concept of body techniques, a whole new field of study opens up before his eyes. The continuation of Mauss's paper on body techniques is seldom quoted. It consists of lists of possible objects for research—as body techniques worthy of being registered and analysed. Walking, for instance, presents in his view special conundrums:

Nothing makes me so dizzy as watching a Kabyle going downstairs in Turkish slippers (*babouches*). How can he keep his feet without the slippers coming off? I have tried to see, to do it, but I can't understand.

Nor can I understand how women can walk in high heels. Thus there is a lot even to be observed, let alone compare [*Ainsi il y a tout à observer, et non pas seulement à comparer*].⁶¹

Observing intensively such puzzles of everyday life, Mauss leads his readers to worlds distant and near. Still, his examples are telling, for he often directs attention to precisely the same techniques that would form the object of Elias's *Process of civilization*. He suggests

studying techniques of bodily care—washing, scrubbing and soaping—and of hygiene, such as spitting, as well as ways of eating, such as 'the use of the fingers, knives', insisting that failing to eat with forks does not denote primitiveness, and so on.⁶²

Fifteen years earlier, in 1919, Joseph Roth (1894–1939) published one of his fine short sketches of city life. Like Mauss's paper, this feuilleton, written in Berlin while Roth was writing for *Filmwelt*, also refers to the time immediately following the Great War. Roth describes himself outside Berlin in a small town, perhaps in Thuringia. Here he expected to find the usual small-town provincial life. But he was surprised. There was too much elegance on display, people were too aware of the latest fashions. Old people had the latest accessories and the young moved surprisingly swiftly, with unexpected elegance. Something was wrong. Town-dwellers failed to be parochial enough. The explanation dawned on him the following rainy Sunday, when he went with everyone else to the local cinema-hall. Roth describes how the spectators followed the moving images intensely and seriously. 'Every hand gesture of the heroine or the hero', he wrote, 'every time they made eyes at each other, was virtually swallowed by the young spectators'. This is the source, he realizes, of the fine gestures of the women he was watching in the streets: 'The simple girl behaved like a lady. The blond salesgirl at the paper-store on the street corner was imitating a princess'.⁶³

Roth does not conclude his text with heavy irony or condescension. Instead, he offers a general observation. Nowadays, he says, film replaces the old courtesy books and that famous nineteenth-century German etiquette guide, the *Knigge*:

From the shadow figures and their fortunes, the scenes and actions in the cinematic world on the screen, the common man is constructing for himself a second, civilized, sometimes even a cultivated 'Self', in which he seeks to merge, and sometimes indeed he does. What the most popular courtesy books did during the century of the book ... is now, in the age of technology, done by the cinema. More rapidly and more vividly [*anschaulich*].⁶⁴

Independently of Mauss, Roth makes a very similar observation about the civilizing power of cinema. Both describe young people consuming the moving images on the screen and using them as templates for their own gestures. Both refer to the powerful experience of the rapid transmission of bodily posture and gestures 'directly', through moving images.⁶⁵ Their attention to the process of diffusion and appropriation is roused not through traditional differ-

⁵⁹ 'Une sorte de révélation me vint à l'hôpital. J'étais malade à New York. Je me demandais où j'avais déjà vu des demoiselles marchant comme mes infirmières. J'avais le temps d'y réfléchir. Je trouvai enfin que c'était au cinéma. Revenu en France, je remarquai, surtout à Paris, la fréquence de cette démarche; les jeunes filles étaient Françaises et elles marchaient aussi de cette façon. En fait, les modes de marche américaine, grâce au cinéma, commençaient à arriver chez nous. C'était une idée que je pouvais généraliser. La position des bras, celle des mains pendant qu'on marche forment une idiosyncrasie sociale, et non simplement un produit de je ne sais quels agencements et mécanismes purement individuels, presque entièrement psychiques. Exemple: je crois pouvoir reconnaître aussi une jeune fille qui a été élevée au couvent. Elle marche, généralement, les poings fermés. Et je me souviens encore de mon professeur de troisième m'interpellant: "Espèce d'animal, tu vas tout le temps tes grandes mains ouvertes!" Donc il existe également une éducation de la marche'. Mauss (1950 [1936]), p. 368; (1979), p. 100.

⁶⁰ Mauss (1969 [1930]), p. 477; in his later *Manuel d'ethnographie* (2006 [1947], p. 99), Mauss recommended studying body techniques with slow-motion cinema. During the 1930s, Franz Boas sought to complete his studies of dance and body movement in Alaska with the help of a movie camera. Boas died before reaching any conclusions: Ruby (1980).

⁶¹ Mauss (1950 [1936]), pp. 381–382; (1979 [1936]), p. 116.

⁶² Mauss (1950 [1936]), p. 382. Mauss (1979 [1936]), p. 117 n. 11 also refers to contemporary studies of kinematics, such as Reuleaux (1875).

⁶³ 'Ich sah dichtgefüllte Reihen und aufgeregte Premierenstimmung beim Publikum. Junge Mädchen mit glühenden Blicken. Gymnasiasten mit würdevollem Ernst, gespannt den Ereignissen des Dramas folgend. Jede Handbewegung, jeder Augenaufschlag des Helden oder der Heldin wurde von der zuschauenden Jugend geradezu verschlungen. Und ich verstand den erzieherischen Einfluß des Kinos auf die Jugend dieser Kleinstadt. Plötzlich war ich sehend geworden: Da her hatten die Frauen dieses kokette Mienenspiel, jenes hoheitsvoll herablassende Kopfnicken, wenn man sie grüßte. Das kleine Laufmädchen benahm sich wie eine Dame. Die blonde Verkäuferin des Papiergeschäftes in der Ecke mimte eine Prinzessin. Der Alltag war Film geworden. Das nüchterne kleine Ereignis—Szene'. Roth (1994 [1919]), pp. 29–30.

⁶⁴ 'Aber aus schattenhaften Gestalten und Geschicken, Szenen und Handlungen in der Filmwelt der Leinwand baut sich der kleine Mensch ein zweites zivilisiertes, manchmal sogar kultivierteres "Ich", in dem er aufzugehen sich bemüht und manchmal sogar aufgeht. Was im Jahrhundert des Buches, wie R. M. Meyer das 19. Jahrhundert nannte, das Werk der gelesenen Modebücher vollbrachte, im Jahrhundert der Technik vollbringt es das Kino. Kürzer und oft anschaulicher. Das Kino als anschaulich gemachter Knigge. Oder ein Knigge mit Kinoillustration'. Adolph Freiherr von Knigge's (1752–1796) shrewd book, *Über den Umgang mit Menschen* (1st ed., 1788) was of course anything but a straightforward etiquette guide, but this is how it came to be perceived later. On Roth's work as a film critic, see Quaresima (1990).

⁶⁵ In her pioneering study of the sociology of cinema, Emilie Altenloh made an observation partly overlapping with Roth's, but referring only to the adoption of fashionable dress by provincial women: 'In die kleinen Städte bringt der Kino den sich Abglanz der großen Welt und zeigt den Frauen, wie man sich in Paris anzieht, was für Hüte man trägt.' Altenloh (1914), p. 91. On cinema audiences in German small towns, see Minkmar (1993); Walter (1997).

ences, but rather by the unexpected similarity between moving bodies—primarily of young women—in societies considered distant, spatially or socially. Roth goes even further by suggesting that by assimilating motion pictures in this way, people were constructing for themselves a second, civilized self. Opponents and enthusiasts of cinema both pointed out its capacity for representing “the outer man”—but not his “soul”, as conservative critics emphasized. Roth, Mauss and Elias, however, went beyond this opposition by conceiving bodily gestures as a medium for the transformation of the whole person.⁶⁶ This entrenched cultural opposition between outer body and inner soul was also rejected by some French avant-garde filmmakers. According to Jean Vigo (1905–1935), the goal of ‘social cinema’ would consist in ‘revealing the hidden reason behind a gesture ... the spirit of a collectivity through one of its purely physical manifestations’.⁶⁷ Jean Epstein’s notion of embodiment underpinned his conception of cinema as a medium making it possible to watch emotions through gestures, not only ‘to see love’, but also to develop ‘a classification of the amorous sentiments’.⁶⁸

Mauss and Roth were also not alone in noticing how gestures and cultural techniques were diffused through the new medium. In his major novel, *Journey by moonlight* (1937), the Hungarian author Antal Szerb (1901–1945) described the female protagonist, Erszi, preparing herself to meet her lover. Erszi, he wrote, dressed in haste, posed in front of the door, ‘and pressed her hands to her breast with that plain, sincere gesture which she had so often seen in the movies’.⁶⁹ In his novel, *The stranger* (completed in 1940), Albert Camus (1913–1960) also portrayed cinema-goers whose gestures bore the recognizable imprint of the film they had just watched.⁷⁰ A bit later, Jacques Tati would make the imitation and appropriation of American ways mediated through cinema—from fast bicycling to forms of flirting—one of the main themes running through his film *Jour de fête* (shot in 1947).⁷¹

Such observations were not limited to the realm of literature or film. Social critics and sociologists, conservative detractors and optimistic reformers noticed the same phenomenon.⁷² It may have been more marked in early cinema, and be partly related to the use of exaggerated ostentatious gestures in silent films,⁷³ but scattered evidence suggests that the appropriation of body postures, gestures and manners did not die out with the talkies. Victor Schamoni noted in 1924 that ‘naïve cinema-goers’ tended to retain the articulate, expressive gestures and movements typical of the cinema; conservative critics found this distasteful.⁷⁴ Dziga Vertov, seeking to document everyday ways of life in the Soviet Union, complained in 1927 that whenever people noticed his camera, the women began to do their hair while the men ‘put on a Douglas Fairbanks or Conrad Veidt face’.⁷⁵ Earlier still, in 1911, Revd H. A. Jump from Connecticut, perhaps with a different political attitude and reflecting an earlier

experience with cinema and different economic conditions, was enthusiastic about the civilizing potential of cinema. ‘The working-man’, said a manager of a successful ‘motion picture house’ in New England to him,

comes here and looks at pictures which show homes much more beautiful than his own; he watches men and women meeting according to the ways of polite society, the man tipping his hat upon the street, or removing it when he enters the house, or stepping aside that the ladies may pass before him; he becomes an observer of the world of good manners.⁷⁶

By the late thirties, the Spanish doctor Gregorio Marañón opened his paper on ‘The psychology of gesture’ with a conclusion not far removed from Marcel Mauss’s earlier observations:

... let us point out the fact that young men and women walk, greet each other, sit down, cross their legs, call to a waiter, light a cigarette, fling matches on the ground and, above all, enact the scenes of love in conformity with a pattern which is, in its turn, the model of the men and women of the screen, who are not usually very brilliant in themselves, and therefore servile imitators of a small number of stars. In large measure, the expressive apparatus of the people of today—especially in fashionable circles—is composed of gestures, almost of tics, imposed upon them by the tyranny of the screen.⁷⁷

Marañón was not a friend of cinema, nor of ‘the multitude which never reasons’, or the ‘revolutionary crowd’ of Republican Spain for that matter. Where others saw imitation and active appropriation, he saw the masses suffering from ‘the contagion of stereotyped and impersonal gesture’.⁷⁸

Such and similar observations can be rounded out with some accounts in the first person by cinema-goers in the 1920s and the 1930s. Some precious pieces of evidence come from the Payne Fund Studies, the first large-scale investigation of the impact of mass media on youth, conducted in the United States, where the first generation who grew up with cinema could be found.⁷⁹ Some of the preserved unpublished materials show how students’ initial assumptions concerning the negative effects of cinema had to be modified in the light of the evidence. Paul G. Cressy, for instance, rejected the ‘direct influence’ theories and argued for understanding movies as ‘one part of the total “social situation” or “configuration” in which they were experienced’.⁸⁰ His notes for a projected manuscript point in a familiar direction: films were used by young people not only for defining occupational ambitions, but also for learning fashions, mannerisms, gestures, postures, vocal inflections, etiquette, manners and techniques of courtship.⁸¹ Herbert Blumer gave his Chicago sociology undergraduates an assignment to write autobiographical accounts of their movie-going experiences; only

⁶⁶ For the critics of “soulless cinema”, see for example Thiess (in Zeller, 1976, p. 276). The opposition of the body and the spirit underlies many of the texts documenting intellectuals’ reaction to cinema. Cinema is the art of the body, arousing emotions, but leaves the spirit emptied, corrupt; this, for instance, is Stefan Zweig’s position (1987 [1911], p. 329).

⁶⁷ Vigo (1988 [1930]), p. 63.

⁶⁸ Epstein (1998a [1921]), pp. 238–239; I rely here on Malcolm Turvey’s (1998) insightful analysis.

⁶⁹ Szerb (2003 [1937]), p. 235.

⁷⁰ Camus (1962), p. 1139. Thanks to Oded Rabinovich for pointing out this passage to me.

⁷¹ Tati (1949). The film was shot in 1947, based on a shorter film shot in the same village in which Tati and his collaborator found refuge during the war years. An early example of a film in which learning cultural techniques from the cinema becomes part of the plot is of course Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr* (Keaton 1924).

⁷² A useful typology of critics’ positions on early cinema is offered by Uricchio & Pearson (1994).

⁷³ See Gunning (1990); Pearson (1992).

⁷⁴ Güttinger (1984), pp. 85–86, quoting Victor Schamoni (Schamoni, 1924), p. 625. Schamoni (1901–1942) was one of the leading film critics of the Weimar Republic.

⁷⁵ Vertov (2000), p. 17 [20 March 1927].

⁷⁶ Jump (1911), pp. 10–11.

⁷⁷ Marañón (1950), pp. 472–473. The article was written in the thirties, certainly before the final defeat of the Spanish Republic in 1939. Cf. also Morin (1953), p. 398.

⁷⁸ Marañón (1950), p. 475.

⁷⁹ Fuller (1996), pp. 169–193.

⁸⁰ Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller (1996), p. 126.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

twenty-one of the essays were preserved. Blumer's students understood that as educated persons they were expected to undervalue cinema and its impact, but the essays are still revealing in several respects.⁸² Whereas Blumer spoke of movies' power of 'emotional possession'—his version of the idea, prevalent in the 1910s, that films could dangerously 'implant ideas'⁸³—several of the students reported their conscious attempts to imitate postures, and to learn modes of behaviour and forms of relationships from the movies. One of the boys wrote: 'In acting and talking to a girl I often use the knowledge I gained from the screen and the actors'. He went to shows 'to learn to imitate the actors', and later, to learn 'a very disgusting act ... to French kiss'.⁸⁴ Even closer to Mauss's and Roth's observations, one of the male students reported:

As I got into high school and into my sixteenth and seventeenth year I began to use the movies as a school of etiquette. I began to observe the table manners of the actors in the eating scenes. I watched for the proper way in which to conduct oneself at a night club, because I began to have ideas that way. The number of buttons the leading man's coat had, the fact that it was single breasted or double breasted, and the cut of its lapel all influenced me in the choice of my own suits. The technique of making love to a girl received considerable of my attention, and it was directly through the movies that I learned to kiss a girl on her ears, neck and cheeks, as well as on the mouth, in a close huddle.⁸⁵

A female student described how, while watching films, she was 'drawn out of the shell that [was herself]': 'I always walked home with haughty mien, but when I arrived I was confronted by the hall mirror which dispelled the pleasant illusion'. She suspected that her flirting techniques were all borrowed from movie heroines.⁸⁶ 'In the vicinity of my home', wrote another student, 'it was the vogue to copy the various dance steps seen on the screen, also many little flourishes; for example we all accepted the hand shake exhibited by Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman* [1925]'. She described how she 'practiced so religiously before the mirror in the hope of attaining attractive facial expressions and movements'.⁸⁷

The notion of Cinema as a transformative mirror, reminiscent of the scene described by Blumer's female student, was projected in 1912 by the German writer Walter von Molo (1880–1958) in a short piece of fiction, constructed as a dialogue between a lady and a writer. Molo offered his readers a gendered image of the uses of cinema, in which the man stood for science, the woman for bodily appropriation. The author has nothing but disgust for the cheap suburban cinema-hall to which he has to accompany the lady. But cinema, he preaches in her ears, is now improving: science slowly begins to take command. The lady finds this hard to grasp: 'How is science—you probably mean the university—supposed to deal with cinema?' The writer patiently explains what he meant: movie cameras are used to study the sea, to measure the duration of explo-

sions, and so on: 'Recently, even actors began using the cinema to study their own actions'. The female protagonist is now won over to the new technology: 'Then you can observe yourself, what you look like? Of course! Tell me, is such a device very expensive?'⁸⁸

Thus, while the male protagonist insists on the scientific uses of cinema—for registering, measuring nature—his female interlocutor, ridiculed by von Molo, is actually aware of the possibilities it opens for active appropriation and self-transformation. Here lies the originality of the tradition of thought linking Elias and Mauss. For in their account, the body is neither reduced to a passive surface for the workings of power, nor do moving images simply infect or invade passive audiences. They are concerned with active appropriation, with the formation of gestures—in clear contrast with contemporaneous uses of the cinematic apparatus to control and measure bodily movements, to reduce gestures to mechanical analysis or to subject them to Taylorist schemes for rationalizing time and energy.⁸⁹ On the contrary: under the impression of the popular uses of cinema, Elias and Mauss turn our attention as well to the active appropriation of gestures by knowing bodies.

The advent of sound does not seem to have brought the process of cultural diffusion of gestures and manners through cinema to an end. Especially telling are some of the experiences related by British cinema-goers of different social backgrounds in sixty motion picture autobiographies presented by J. P. Mayer in a study published in 1948. Obtained through a competition in the *Picture-goer*, the texts bear the clear imprint of Mayer's leading questions, but do not necessarily confirm his expectations. Keen attention to manners, to ways of speech and dress, gestures and posture is evident almost everywhere, even among those who deny that cinema affected their conduct. Several young men and women seem to provide exact corroboration for Roth's description of an intensive civilizing process aided by cinema. A young man of working-class origin, just about to leave school in 1945, wrote:

In Films [sic] I have imitated lot of things in my manner. For instance since I have been going to the pictures I always touch my hat when I meet somebody. I always greet every body with a smile. When I bump into somebody I always say I am sorry. If I pass in front of anybody I always say excuse-me. I have also learned to become better mannered at the dinner table.⁹⁰

Young people claim to have learned how to brush their teeth effectively, to smoke, or to bring flowers when courting a girl; they report having adopted dress and hairstyles, and especially manners of speech.⁹¹ They clearly distinguish the short-term effects of watching a film, the lingering of gestures and postures, from attempts to adopt manners or to quote gestures. Young women, in particular, describe how they sought to make particular gestures their own—twirling a lock of the beloved's hair or closing one's eyes when kiss-

⁸² Blumer published his findings in *Movies and conduct* (1933); the appendices contain only some of the materials fathered in 1927 and it has been claimed the actual interviews were occasionally misrepresented; see Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller (1996), pp. 237–241, which also reproduces the ten motion-picture autobiographies of college students used in the following discussion (pp. 242–280).

⁸³ On educators' fears of the negative effects of movies on children and youth, see Butsch (2001).

⁸⁴ Case 4: Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller (1996), pp. 253–254.

⁸⁵ Case 10: *ibid.*, pp. 278–279.

⁸⁶ Case 5: *ibid.*, pp. 256, 260.

⁸⁷ Case 8: *ibid.*, p. 273. Similar evidence can be found in the reminiscences of cinema-goers of the 1920s in Europe. In a local cinema in East London, one of them said that he was watching 'the technique of the hero with [his] girlfriend. I thought I could pick up a few tips for this sort of technique for later on, for the time when I got fed up with football, and this might come in handy at a later date'. His Italian counterpart said that for him, cinema 'was everything. It was about how to live. How to talk and walk. How to be courted. How to approach your first love'. Their testimonies can be found in Part 6 of the documentary series *People's century: 1927: Great escape* (Davis et al. 1995).

⁸⁸ Molo (1992 [1912]), p. 37.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, Braune & Fischer (1987 [1895–1904]). It seems that such uses have drawn most scholarly attention until now.

⁹⁰ Mayer (1978 [1948]), no. 7. This is the sequel to Mayer's earlier study of cinema (1946), which contained a loosely organized chapter on 'Movies and conduct'; see esp. pp. 148–150. The documentation (pp. 178–273) contains more evidence on the process of adopting gestures and manners (e.g. pp. 187, 188, 193, 195, 206–207, 215, 223, 226).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 12, p. 40; no. 15, p. 42; no. 35, p. 83; no. 58, pp. 129–130.

ing—but they also expected boyfriends to take example from motion pictures. Courting, in fact, seems to have been a central social context for imitating forms of conduct and gestures—from “making eyes” to graceful manners.⁹² As if to illustrate Elias’s focus on self-restraint as a crucial element of the civilizing process, as well as Revd Jump’s hope that cinema would educate the common man, a young woman reports how she overcame her outbursts of temper by ‘wondering what [the British film star] Deanna [Durbin] would do’ and modifying her own reactions accordingly: ‘She had far more influence on me than any amount of lectures or rows from parents would have had’.⁹³

Yet unlike the Blumer study, Mayer’s admittedly small sample is still heterogeneous enough to give at least some precious clues on the social preconditions for this modest process of civilization “from below”. The statement just quoted comes from a medical student whose father was a foreman in a petrol depot; her description of the role of cinema should be read in the context of her upward social trajectory and attendant beliefs in self-improvement. Thus, not all of Mayer’s subjects claim to have successfully and massively adopted gestures and manners from the cinema: all of those emphatically rebuffing any suggestion that they acquired cultural models from the cinema seem to have been of middle-class origin,⁹⁴ while some of the poorer workers describe how contact with superior models only sharpened their awareness of social distance. ‘I am afraid films have made me very dissatisfied with the way I live and of the manners of people. I love the way everyone when acting knows just how to behave with perfect grace’, wrote a seventeen-year-old typist.⁹⁵ ‘My imitation probably had no resemblance’, writes the son of a wood-cutting machinist and a housewife. ‘I soon realized though that imitations are cheap and naturalness is the only course’, he adds, as if anticipating defeat by devaluing his attempts and reaffirming his social identity.⁹⁶ The medial availability of cultural models did not necessarily make them socially accessible.

4.

I have sought to trace and contextualize the methodological innovations in Norbert Elias’s main work, *The process of civilization*, pertaining to the perception and reconstruction of invisible movement: the very slow movement of history, of long-term processes of change; and the microscopic, fleeting movements of the human body, of gestures and manners. Building a series out of fragments of discourse, constructing a curve of historical development, focusing on minute bodily gestures and making their long-term transformation visible through a quick succession of images—this is the toolkit Elias devised for the task.⁹⁷

Elias’s methodological experimentation with serial analysis and the representation of historical change through curves, I would suggest, lies at the intersection of quantitative and qualitative approaches, of the fascination with the graphic method and established traditions of textual interpretation. It may be worthwhile to pursue further the hypothesis that an early, productive encounter between the history of science and social history or historical sociology brought about some easily overlooked yet fascinating variants of cultural history. Both the attempt to reconstruct invisible, slow structural change and the focus on minute gestures as a

clue to reconstructing a process of civilization, moreover, were significantly related—though not in the same way and to different degrees—to the advent of cinema, to intensive discussions of its potentialities and to its popular appropriation. With cinema, I would argue, came a heightened awareness of minute bodily gestures coupled with the recognition that they were subject to historical change and culturally transmitted. Recent studies of the history of gestures and the acceleration of movement have tended to focus on attempts between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s to subject bodies and regulate their movements by using new technologies. Scientific studies of movement seemed to reduce gestures to mechanical movements; hence their uncanny complicity with attempts to impose labour discipline and to rationalize movement in the context of Fordist capitalism. Yet the case documented here points in a different direction. Audiences used cinema to adopt gestures and body techniques, not in the context of imposed discipline but as strategies of self-fashioning, promising to reduce cultural distance.

Among the motion pictures’ various social uses, the one that emerges from the evidence presented here may have received insufficient attention: making one of the most precious instruments of social distinction—the socialized moving body—available in unusual ways and perhaps to a hitherto unknown extent to classes far removed from the settings in which classed bodies had traditionally been shaped. The scope of this phenomenon or its social implications could not be explored here. For our purposes, it is the peculiar convergence of scholarly interest in cinema and of one of the popular uses of film—that is, of research and common practices—that should be emphasized. Cinema not only made people familiar with increased motion; it was itself part of the accelerated motion of history, of a perceived change of pace in the process of civilization, which shed specific light on its historical antecedents, on invisible, long-term, slow historical processes. Heightened awareness of cases of the swift transmission of gestures and their popular appropriation through cinema seems to have played an essential role in rethinking the notion of civilization and culture.

This does not imply a sort of technological determinism, nor a straightforward relationship between the experience of a new technology and the emergence of new insights and procedures of investigation. Cinema itself was not a naked technology bursting into a world of experience. Particularly relevant in this context is William Uricchio’s argument that perceptions of cinema and its potential were themselves shaped by cultural expectations and preoccupations that had preceded the actual invention and diffusion of the motion pictures (Uricchio 2004). It is thus not cinema in itself, or its unmediated experience, that I seek to relate to Elias’s experiments with the representation of the movement of history; for the uses of cinema and the expectations regarding its potentialities were themselves shaped by existing discourses on liveliness and actuality, on problems of movement and on new conceptualizations of time.

In the case of according fleeting gestures a crucial role in refiguring the history of civilization, it was not cinema itself but its popular appropriations, I suggest, that can be meaningfully related to new insights. Furthermore, there remains a tension between the popular uses and Elias’s theory of the shaping of civilized persons: for the process emerging from the accounts of audiences’ use of

⁹² Ibid., no. 13, p. 42; no. 30, p. 74; no. 38, p. 94; no. 40, p. 98; no. 46, p. 111; no. 54, p. 123.

⁹³ Ibid., no. 36, p. 90.

⁹⁴ Ibid., no. 19, p. 54; no. 33, p. 79; no. 46, p. 111; no. 52, p. 121; no. 57, p. 125; no. 46, p. 111. Cf. no. 30, p. 73; no. 41, p. 101 (admitting unconscious adoption of mannerisms).

⁹⁵ Ibid., no. 20, p. 57. Cf. no. 30, p. 74; no. 34, pp. 81, 83; no. 54, p. 123.

⁹⁶ Mayer (1978 [1948]), no. 50, p. 117; cf. no. 53, p. 122.

⁹⁷ Note that in Elias’s solution, the two innovations are interrelated: the single gestures and movements of the body are not to be read as indicating the particular set of mind of some single actor in a given moment. They are supposed to serve as indicators of a changing standard of behaviour, and hence of a changed habitus when compared with previous or consecutive stages.

cinema is not simply a “trickle-down effect” of diffusing upper-class manners; they give a sense of persistent discrepancies and social distance that cultural mediation cannot easily bridge. In the accounts, women play at least as significant a role as men, but in Elias's *Process of civilization*, they hardly fit the model. Elias is speaking implicitly of how men were civilized; whenever women are invoked, the ‘curve of civilization’ becomes too complicated and sometimes even seems to change its direction.⁹⁸ Finally, whereas Elias's account retains a normative bias, the sources quoted give a sense of a popular conception of manners and politeness as social strategies. The appropriation of cultural repertoires of civility is accompanied by new desires, by the reshaping of emotional economies—not simply by restraint and self-monitoring. Self-monitoring itself emerges from these accounts—one thinks about the mirror scenes—not simply in terms of imposed control, but as a pleasurable experience. In Elias's account, the super-ego is often conceived as a simple instance of censorship, restraining, forbidding. Making sense of the accounts of popular appropriation of manners and gestures requires a more complex notion, in which the appropriation of cultural models both restrains and enables new desires. Be this as it may: looking into early cinematic experiments and popular uses of the cinema may provide us not only with a possible context for some of Elias's innovations, but perhaps also with some suggestive clues as to how to go further.

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