

## VISIBLE MAN<sup>1</sup>

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The discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible. People have been able to glean so much from reading that they could afford to neglect other forms of communication.

Victor Hugo once wrote that the printed book has taken over the role of medieval cathedrals and has become the repository of the spirit of the people. But the thousands of books fragmented the single spirit of the cathedrals into a myriad different opinions. The printed word smashed the stone to smithereens and broke up the church into a thousand books. In this way, the *visual spirit* was transformed into a legible spirit, and a *visual culture* was changed into a conceptual one. It is universally acknowledged that this change has radically altered the face of life in general.<sup>2</sup> But the degree of change to which the face of the individual human being has been subject – his brow, his eyes, his mouth – has been largely overlooked.

Now another device is at work, giving culture a new turn towards the visual and the human being a new face. It is the cinematograph, a technology for the multiplication and dissemination of the products of the human mind, just like the printing press, and its impact on human culture will not be less momentous.

To say nothing is by no means the same as having nothing to say. Those who remain silent can still be overflowing with things to say, which, however, can be uttered only in forms, pictures, gestures and facial expressions. For the man of visual culture is not like a deaf mute who replaces words with sign language. He does not think in words whose syllables he inscribes in the air with the dots and dashes of the Morse code. His gestures do not signify concepts at all, but are the direct expression of his own non-rational self, and whatever is expressed in his face and his movements arises from a stratum of the soul that can never be brought to the light of day by words. Here, the body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless.

It was a golden age for the visual arts when the painter and the sculptor did more than fill empty space with abstract forms and shapes, and man

1. See TotF, 'Der sichtbare Mensch' (pp. 40ff).

2. TotF, p. 40. BB adds, 'This of course had its social and economic causes.'

was more than just a formal problem for the artist. Artists were permitted to paint the human soul and spirit without being deemed 'literary', because soul and spirit were not tied to concepts but could utterly be made flesh. This was the happy time when paintings could have an 'idea' and a 'theme' of their own because ideas did not always manifest themselves first in concepts and words and the painter did not face the task of providing concepts and words with a subsequent illustration. The soul that became body without mediation could be painted and sculpted in its primary manifestation. But since the advent of printing the word has become the principal bridge joining human beings to one another. The soul has migrated into the word and become crystallized there. The body, however, has been stripped of soul and emptied.

The expressive surface of our bodies has been reduced to just our face. This is not simply because we cover the other parts of our bodies with clothes. Our face has now come to resemble a clumsy little semaphore of the soul, sticking up in the air and signalling as best it may. Sometimes, our hands help out a little, evoking the melancholy of mutilated limbs. The back of a headless Greek torso always reveals whether the lost face was laughing or weeping – we can still see this clearly. Venus's hips smile as expressively as her face, and casting a veil over her head would not be enough to prevent us from guessing her thoughts and feelings. For in those days man was visible in his entire body. In a culture dominated by words, however, now that the soul has become audible, it has grown almost invisible. This is what the printing press has done.<sup>3</sup>

Well, the situation now is that once again our culture is being given a radically new direction – this time by film. Every evening many millions of people sit and experience human destinies, characters, feelings and moods of every kind with their eyes, and without the need for words. For the intertitles that films still have are insignificant; they are partly the ephemeral rudiments of as yet undeveloped forms and partly they bear a special meaning that does not set out to assist the visual expression.<sup>4</sup> The whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words characteristic of the sign language of the deaf and dumb, but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. *Man will become visible once again.*

Modern philologists and historians of language have established that the origins of language are to be found in *expressive movements*. By this we mean that when man began to speak he began like a child, by moving his tongue and lips in the same way as his hands and his facial muscles: in other words, uttering sounds was not his original purpose. Initially, the

3. TotF omits the classical references, stating merely, after 'mutilated limbs', that 'In the epoch of word culture the soul learnt to speak but had grown almost invisible. Such was the effect of the printing press' (p. 41).

4. Edith Bone's translation of TotF replaces 'intertitles' with 'words' (p. 41).

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movements of his tongue and lips were no more than spontaneous gestures, on a par with other bodily gestures. The fact that he uttered sounds at the same time was a secondary phenomenon, one subsequently exploited for practical purposes. The immediately visible spirit was then transformed into a mediated audible spirit and much was lost in the process, as in all translation. But the language of gestures is the true mother tongue of mankind.

We are beginning to recall this language and are poised to learn it anew. As yet, it is still clumsy and primitive, and far from able to rival the subtleties of modern verbal art.<sup>5</sup> But because its roots in human nature are older and deeper than the spoken language, and because it is nevertheless fundamentally new, its stammerings and stutterings often articulate ideas that the artists of the word strive in vain to express.

Is it by pure chance that recent decades have witnessed a revival of the art of dance at the same time as film became a universal cultural need? We evidently have many things to say that cannot be expressed in words. Now that the secondary and derivative modes of our culture appear to have ended up in blind alleys of different sorts, we are reverting to primordial forms of expression. The word seems to have taken men by brute force; over-rigid concepts have obliterated much, created an absence which we now feel keenly, and which music alone does not suffice to fill. The culture of words is dematerialized, abstract and over-intellectualized; it degrades the human body to the status of a biological organism. But the new language of gestures that is emerging at present arises from our painful yearning to be human beings with our entire bodies, from top to toe and not merely in our speech. We long to stop dragging our body around like an alien thing that is useful only as a practical set of tools. This new language arises from our yearning for the *embodied human* being who has fallen silent, who has been forgotten and has become invisible.

I will address later the question of why the decorative choreography of dancers shall fail to produce this new language. It is film that will have the ability to raise up and make visible once more human beings who are now buried under mountains of words and concepts. But today this visible man is in an in-between state: no longer there and not yet present. It is a law of nature that any organ that falls into disuse degenerates and atrophies. In the culture of words our bodies were not fully used and have lost their expressiveness in consequence. This is why they have become clumsy, primitive, stupid and barbaric. Have we not often observed that primitive peoples have a stock of gestures that is richer than that of a

5 TotF here inserts an analogy with music: 'How much of human thought would remain unexpressed if we had no music! ... Although ... human experiences are not rational, conceptual contents, they are nevertheless neither vague nor blurred, but as clear and unequivocal as is music.' (p. 42). The musical analogy replaces the emphasis in *Visible Man* on the art of dance.

highly educated European with a vast vocabulary at his disposal? Once a few years have passed in which the art of film has flourished, our academics will perhaps realize that we should turn to the cinema so as to compile a lexicon of gestures and facial expressions on a par with our dictionaries of words. But the audience will not wait for this new grammar to be put together by academies of the future; they will go to the cinema and learn it themselves.

Much has been said about the modern European's neglect of his body. And the response has been an enthusiastic devotion to sport. However, while sport can make the body healthy and beautiful, it cannot make it eloquent, since it strengthens only the animal qualities. Sport cannot make of the body a sensitive medium of the soul, capable of registering its slightest motion. It is possible to have the most powerful and beautiful of voices, and yet to remain incapable of saying what one means.

This neglect of the body has not only caused its expressive powers to atrophy; it has similarly damaged the soul that the body should express. For we should take note that the soul that is expressed in words is not identical with the soul that finds expression in gestures, any more than music simply says the same thing as literature. We can dredge words up from the deep by the bucketful, but they will be very different from the gestures we can acquire by a similar process, and will bring quite different treasures to the surface. In this instance, however, if *nothing* is drawn from it, the well dries up. For our ability to express ourselves conditions our thoughts and feelings in advance. That is the nature of our mental economy; it is incapable of producing anything that cannot be used. Psychological and logical analyses have demonstrated that our words are not simply the after-images of our thoughts, but forms that determine those thoughts from the outset. Bad writers and dilettantes may have a lot to say about the ineffability of their feelings and thoughts, but it is in reality only very, very seldom that we can conceive of ideas that we are unable to express – and in such cases we do not really know what it is that we have thought. Here, as in every other sphere, the development of the human mind is dialectical. As it grows and expands, the mind grows and extends its powers of self-expression; at the same time, these expanded powers make it possible for the mind to grow in its turn.

The image of the world that is contained within the word gives rise to a seamless, meaningful system. Things that this system does not include are not simply *missing*, just as colours cannot be said to be *missing* from music, even though they are not present. Such a complete and seamless system can also be found in the image of man and the world as an immediate expressive gesture. Human culture can be conceived in the absence of language. Admittedly, it would look quite different from what we have now, but it would not necessarily be inferior. It would at any rate be less abstract and less estranged from the immediate reality of people and things.

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Ruth Saint Denis, that greatest of the geniuses of dance, writes in her autobiography that she did not learn to speak until she was five.<sup>6</sup> She had lived a secluded life, alone with her mother, who was completely paralysed for many years and was in consequence especially sensitive to the meaning of movement. They understood each other so completely through signs and gestures that Ruth had no need of language and was very slow in learning to speak. Her body, however, became so eloquent that she became a great and wonderful poet of gesture. *by Ruth Saint Denis*

Yet the expressive movements of even the greatest dancer can never amount to more than a concert-hall experience for the few; they remain a segregated form of art, separate from life. Only an applied art can be culture. Not culture in the sense of the beautiful poses of statues in art galleries, but the gait and the everyday gestures of people in the street or at their work. Culture means the penetration of the ordinary material of life by the human spirit, and a visual culture must surely provide us with new and different expressive forms for our daily intercourse with one another. The art of dance cannot do this; it is a task that will be accomplished only by film.

In general, culture appears to be taking the road from the abstract mind to the visible body. When we see a person's movements or his sensitive hands, do we not recognize the spirit of his ancestors? The fathers' thoughts become the nervous sensitivity, the taste and instinct of the children. Conscious knowledge turns into instinctive sensibility: *it is materialized as culture in the body*. The body's expressiveness is always the latest product of a cultural process. This means that however primitive and barbarous the film may be in comparison to literature as it is *today*, it nevertheless represents the future development of culture because it involves the direct transformation of spirit into body.

This path leads in two apparently opposite directions. At first glance, it appears as if the language of physiognomy can only increase and intensify the process of estrangement and alienation that started with the confusion of tongues in the Tower of Babel. This cultural path seems to point towards the isolation of the individual, to loneliness. For, after all, following the confusion of tongues in Babel, communities still survived who shared a common mastery of the words and concepts of their single mother tongue, while shared dictionaries and grammars rescued human beings from the ultimate solitariness of mutual incomprehension. But the language of gestures is far more individual and personal than the language of words. Admittedly, facial expressions have their own vocabulary of 'conventional', standard forms, so much so that we could and indeed should compile a comparative 'gesturology' on the model of comparative linguistics. However, although this language of gestures has its traditions, it is unlike grammar in that it lacks strict and binding rules,

6. Ruth Saint Denis (1879-1968) was a US dancer, choreographer, teacher and lecturer. She was a pioneer in freeing dance from the rigid rules of traditional ballet.

whose neglect would be severely punished in school. This language is still so young that it can be smoothly moulded to fit the particular nature of each individual. It is still at the stage where it can be created by the mind, rather than mind being created by it.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel. The screens of the entire world are now starting to project the *first international language*, the language of gestures and facial expressions. This internationalism has its roots in economics, which always provides the firmest foundation. A film costs so much to produce that it can only make a profit if it has international distribution. The few intertitles required are readily translated from one language into another. But the actors' facial expressions must be comprehensible to the whole world. This sets strict limits to national characteristics. The early years of film-making witnessed a struggle for hegemony between the Anglo-Saxon and the French styles of expression - the laws of the film market had room for only one universal language of gesture, which had to be comprehensible in all of its nuances from San Francisco to Smyrna and to princesses and working girls alike. Today, film already speaks the only shared universal language. Special ethnographic features, national characteristics, may be introduced from time to time as local colour, as the ornamental aspects of a stylized milieu. But they are never more than *psychological motifs*. The gesture that decides the course and the meaning of the action must be comprehensible to the widest variety of peoples, since otherwise the film will not recoup its costs. We may say that the language of gestures has become standardized in film. It follows from this that a kind of standard psychology of the white race has now taken shape and this forms the bedrock of every film story. This explains what up to now has been the primitive, stereotyped nature of these stories; but despite their simplicity, this development is of immense importance. It contains the first living seeds of the standard white man who will one day emerge as the synthesis of the mix of different races and peoples. The cinematograph is a machine that in its own way will create a living, concrete internationalism: *the unique, shared psyche of the white man*. We can go further. By suggesting a uniform ideal of beauty as the universal goal of selective breeding, the film will help to produce a uniform type of the white race. The variety of facial expressions and

7. Balázs returns to this theme in *TotF*, where he revises his earlier call for a 'gesturology' limited to the 'standard white man', and calls instead for a 'scientific' physiognomy that would evade the ideological pitfalls of physiognomy in the form it took under European fascism (where it became a key element in 'scientific' racism). Balázs writes: 'In any case, it is difficult to say which type of face is really representative of any nation or race. Is there an undisputed, generally accepted English face? If so, what is it like? And why should that particular face be the truly typical and not some other face? As there is a science of comparative linguistics, so there should be a comparative science of gesture and mimicry, with research into these in order to find the common fundamental forms of expressive movement. The film offers the means to establish such a science' (p. 81).

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bodily gestures has drawn sharper frontiers between peoples than has any customs barrier, but these will gradually be eroded by film. And, when man finally becomes visible, he will always be able to recognize himself, despite the gulf between widely differing languages.<sup>8</sup>

8. Balázs's later transition from the racial essentialism of this passage to a Marxist-inflected cultural determinism that sees cinematic internationalism as the product of film's penetration of international markets, is visible in the replacement in *TotF* of this passage on the 'standard white man' with the following (p. 45): 'The silent film helped people to become physically accustomed to each other and was about to create an international human type. When once a common cause will have united men within the limits of their own race and nation, then the film which makes visible man equally visible to everyone, will greatly aid in levelling physical differences between the various races and nations and will thus be one of the most useful pioneers in the development towards an international universal humanity.' Balázs's newly acquired cultural relativism – a position that allows for differing cultural 'viewpoints' – is further evident in *TotF* in a section on 'Children and savages' (sic) where he observes (p. 81): 'The close-up often reveals unusual gestures and mimicry: unusual, that is, from the white man's viewpoint.'