

Gesture, Interruption, Vibration: Rethinking Early Twentieth-Century Gestural Theory and Practice in Walter Benjamin, Rudolf von Laban, and Mary Wigman

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Convulsive beauty will be . . . fixed-explosive.

—André Breton (1987, 19)

“Epic theater is a gestic theater,” Walter Benjamin writes in his 1931 essay on Brecht, entitled “What Is the Epic Theater? (I),” and he adds “[t]he more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in acting, the more gestures result. The interruption of an action is thus at the foreground of epic theater” (1991, 521).¹ Benjamin’s observations mark a twofold break with the aesthetics of theater. On the one side, he propagates Brecht’s new concept of epic theater, which the latter set against a theater of illusion and empathy; on the other side, he introduces a shift in the theory of theatrical gesture, favoring thereby a new paradigm of arrest. Gestural arrest is to be understood, here, as a defamiliarizing theatrical intervention into everyday gestural regimes, bringing them to a halt and deconstructing them in order to reveal their ideological implications. Theatrical gesture, that is, was no longer conceived as a universal language of the soul, as in the eighteenth century, nor was it considered an “involuntary physiological response” or an “unconscious manifestation of psychic depth,” as in nineteenth-century naturalism (Smart 2004, 17). If Brecht and Benjamin formed “one of the classic literary partnerships of the revolutionary Socialist movement” (Mitchell 1998, vii), they did so not least because of a shared belief in the political power of a theater that lays bare its own gestural devices.

It is not Brecht’s much-discussed theatrical work, but Benjamin’s theory of gesture, that will initiate the readings of the following article. This theory forms an important counterpart to the equally innovative gestural theory and practice that were developed by Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman in the field of dance. Laban and Wigman also broke with the aesthetic tradition of their genre. In the ballets of the *danse d’école*, sequences of gestural pantomime alternate with sequences of pure dancing; Laban and Wigman (and the various other proponents of Weimar dance who are generally subsumed under the heading of *Ausdruckstanz*) are united by the fact that they regard dance itself as gesture.² In this sense, they cleared the terrain for a meta-generic comparison of theatrical and danced gesture on the basis of a theory of gesture itself. The new gestural dance was not meant to give direct access to personal emotions, as in the eighteenth-century model of dramatic gesture. It “instituted a split between emotion and expression” (Franko 1995, x); that is, it engaged in processes of gestural abstraction that were deemed reflective and productive of universal “laws of

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movement,” and of modes of “experiencing, being, and communicating” (Laban 1920, 58). Above all, gesture was inextricably linked to the flow of movement (Wigman 1933, 19). This aesthetic of gestural flow mirrors a vitalist understanding of life that was based on the belief in transhistorical continuities between human and cosmic energy, between the “gestures” of the world and those of the dancer. Benjamin’s Brechtian gestures, by contrast, address inscriptions and manipulations of bodies, which provide comment on the conditions of society by disrupting and subjecting to critique the essentializing aspects of transhistorical and vitalist flow. A comparison of Benjamin with Laban and Wigman thus throws into relief the characteristics of their heterogeneous approaches to gesture.

Approaching theater and dance from a perspective that is shaped by an interest in theories of gesture, my contribution rests on the assumption that both arts inform—and are informed by—a multifaceted gestural imaginary that arises in the early twentieth century across artistic practices, and aesthetic and scientific discourses. Its dense, unbalanced, pulsating energy integrates, transforms, and comments upon everyday gestural conduct; it embraces aesthetics of arrest and aesthetics of flow.³ In particular, my inquiry proposes to revisit sites and forms of vibration, which, as I would like to show, both belong to and are situated at the edges of the new gestural imaginary. These sites and forms of vibration hold the promise of enriching or destabilizing—or enriching by destabilizing—the new gestural aesthetic. This becomes evident in dancerly vibration’s inaugural moment, Vaslav Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, which will be discussed in a brief excursus, and in Wigman’s types of shivering or bouncing. Vibration also constitutes an almost imperceptible fault line between Benjamin’s arrest-based and the dancers’ flow-based approaches to gesture. Much of my discussion of Benjamin will trace the occurrence of a vibratory energy in “What Is the Epic Theater? (I)” (Benjamin 1991) and its absence in the second version of the essay, the 1939 “What Is the Epic Theater? (II)” (Benjamin 2006). This trajectory is echoed by a shift in response to the gestural from astonishment to critique. In Benjamin, both responses bear revolutionary potential—one mystical, the other one more detached. The mystical element of his thinking resounds with the vitalist paradigm, yet he never subscribed to the latter’s reactionary tendencies. In Laban, vibrations are above all media of transmission between performers and audience. Laban’s approach is informed by a widespread interest in phenomena of vibration and resonance in the fields of acoustics, psycho-physiology, and esotericism, which forms a backdrop to my discussion while exceeding its scope.⁴ Laban’s vibratory exchange shares with Benjamin’s astonishment a certain involuntary quality; yet it ultimately represents a third type of response to the gestural that is closer to (although not entirely concurrent with) Benjamin’s notion of innervation. Due to their propensity to accommodate both left-wing and proto-fascist instrumentalization of bodily experience, early twentieth-century theories of vibratory transmission remain politically ambivalent. Benjamin responded to this ambivalence by modifying his belief in collective innervation; Laban embraced it in order to promote his new philosophy of dance (cf. Baxmann 2000, 217–52).

Gesture and “Restless Stillness”

If André Lepecki has defined vibration as “restless stillness” and identified “dance’s project,” in modernity, “as gradually moving along and within this restless stillness” (2000, 336), my contribution would like to append to this the proposition to rethink the fundamental importance in dance of the impure tension between movement and arrest from the perspective of gesture, and to frame this with Benjamin’s unique engagement with this tension in his thinking about Brechtian theater. Restless stillness, that is, is not uniquely dance’s project (pace Lepecki). But, dance, because of its embodied aspect, became an epicenter of what Linda Dalrymple-Henderson has called “vibratory modernism” (2002, 126). Engaging with types of modernist movement culture as belonging to a second grand wave of gestural renewal in the history of Western concert dance,⁵ my argument addresses a historically situated moment at which the impregnation of stillness with motion was

prominently bound up not with a desire to display the body's capacity of ideal geometric alignment, as in the (always also fragile) poses of classical ballet, but with the will to expose the body's gestural potential. A ballerina's trembling, in her *attitude en pointe* or any other bravura pose, was a mark of deficiency, an element to be hushed up; the vibrato of a Wigman dancer became part of her gestural idiom.⁶ In Wigman, the movement quality of vibration formalizes trembling and turns it into an "action mode" (Manning 2006, 44); something that used to happen *to* a dancer is now something that she *makes happen*. As Gerald Siegmund has shown, the classical imaginary can be productively addressed through a Lacanian lens of mismatch—of a desiring confrontation of a fundamentally fragmented body with a visually constituted image of wholeness and perfection. "Each dance technique," Siegmund argues, can be understood as an operational tool for "creating imaginary bodies, which (as Freud shows) do not correspond to anatomy" (Siegmund 2006, 196–97). They are "wishful bodies that articulate the subject's desire in symptomatic fashion," projecting the subject onto a site where it does not belong, by way of images that do not match its reality (2006, 196–97). While Siegmund's argument about wishful bodies finds one of its correlatives in classical ballet's "held postures," which "offer the viewer the experience of union with the ideal" (2006, 205), Ramsay Burt has qualified the modernist imaginary as one infiltrated by not-so-wishful, "alien bodies," articulating "the disturbing new spaces and rhythms of modernity" (1998, 17). Burt is also informed by a Freudian point of view when claiming "what seemed alien about modern dancing . . . was nevertheless uncannily familiar because of the extent to which individuals were themselves alienated by modernity" (1998, 17). Seen within this context, Gabriele Brandstetter's (2015) elaboration of modernist body images along the lines of Aby Warburg's affectively charged "emotive formulas" has drawn out idealizations of the alien, or the alien-ness of the ideal, in modernity's indebtedness to archaic and exoticist patterns of movement or corporeal contours. Susan Manning (2006) in turn has engaged with the image or shape of the body through Mary Wigman's early aesthetic of *Gestalt im Raum*. Manning has defined a focus in this performer on "configurations of energy in space" that were fueled not only by iconographic traditions, but even more so by principles of movement such as "folding-unfolding, rising-falling, pressing-pulling, bending-reaching, rotating and twisting, undulating and heaving, swinging, swaying," and not least "vibrating . . . and shaking" (2006, 44). Dee Reynolds thus argues that Wigman's contribution to modernism should be considered an act of "kinesthetic imagination," which she defines as arising from "[m]ovement events that disrupt normative, habitual ways of using energy in movement and produce innovations in production, distribution, expenditure and retention of energy in the body" (2007, 4).

The following, then, will add a gestural twist or, in fact, twitch to this body of work, approaching gesture's unstable relationship with the image from its wobbly, quivering, and potentially political margins. It aims to give further evidence for situating early twentieth-century dance within the force field of "restless stillness," but it also aims to introduce a difference within this field, by casting Benjamin's theory of vibratory theatrical gesture against the theories and practices of vibratory gesture in dance. Above all, my discussion of a canonical thinker and two canonical dancers continues to investigate a richly evocative but not yet canonical topic in the research on modernism. It contributes to rendering modernism "a more flexible and ambivalent critical category" (Franko 1995, ix). And it explores constellations that do not only deserve to be considered within their own parameters; they also shed new light on approaches to the phenomenon of vibration in contemporary dance by putting them into historical perspective.

Walter Benjamin and Gesture as Interruption

Benjamin developed his main theory of the gestural in the 1930s in the context of his thoughts on Brecht. Next to a number of shorter writings, this resulted in two essays, the above-quoted "What Is the Epic Theater? (I)" (1991) and the partly overlapping, yet also revised and slimmed-down version, "What Is the Epic Theater? (II)" (2006).⁷ Both carve out the fundamental insight, brought to

light by Brecht's theatrical practice, of gesture as emerging from interruption. The kind of interruption that Benjamin is trying to grasp, however, is from the outset qualified as a type of non-static stillness. "What Is the Epic Theater? (I)" speaks of the "fixed beginning and ending" of gestures as part of a dialectic of a "strict, framelike closure of each element of an attitude, which, in its totality, is still in lively flow" (1991, 521). The production of gesture thus relies on arresting interventions into movement, and more specifically into action. Instead of character or plot, epic theater considers gesture its actual "material" (1991, 521). Gesture's task must be "less the development of action than the representation of situations" (1991, 521; 2006, 304). "What Is the Epic Theater? (I)" then, proposes an extraordinary definition of gesture that rests within, and at the same time moves beyond, the Brechtian context. Gesture becomes the prime site and makes corporeal the meaning of "dialectics at a standstill," the thought figure so crucial to Benjamin's particular critique:

Gesture demonstrates the social meaning and applicability of dialectical thinking. It puts to the test the effect that situations have on human beings. Without a concrete insight into the body of society, the director will not be able to solve the problems that he is facing during the rehearsal process. The dialectic at which epic theater aims, however, does not rely on the temporal succession of scenes. Instead, it already manifests itself in the gestural elements upon which every temporal succession is based, elements which can only improperly be called such, because they are not any simpler than the succession itself. By way of situations, which are the imprint of human gestures, actions and words, immanently dialectical behavior is being revealed in a flash. The situation which is uncovered by the epic theater is that of dialectics at a standstill. For . . . in epic theater, it is not the contradictory course of utterances or of actions that is the mother of dialectics but rather gesture itself. (1991, 530)

Following the available translation into American English of "What Is the Epic Theater? (II)" "situation" renders the German "*Zustand*," a state or stance (*Stand*) which is still infected by the trajectory that led towards it, epitomized in the prefix *Zu-* (toward). In the words of Samuel Weber, Benjamin's "*Zustand*" is "a configuration that is not simply stable or self-contained but above all, relational, determined . . . by its relation to that which it has interrupted and from which it has separated itself" (2002, 35). As such, the social conditions, situations, or states that come to light in Brechtian theater echo the conditions—and conditionings—of the gestural means that bring them into being. They constitute fleeting imprints of human gestures—symptomatically charged tableaux that are assembled and disassembled according to the laws of the Brechtian practice of montage (cf. Didi-Huberman 2009, 86–90). In Weber's words, the "framelike closure" embodied in gesture "remains caught up in that from which it has partially extricated itself, in the 'living flux' of a certain temporality" (2002, 32). Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill" must be thought, then, as suspended tension. This unresolved or "frozen unrest" (2006b, 169), as Benjamin calls it in "Central Park," is a form of dialectics, to quote Weber again, that is "very different from the more familiar Hegelian category, which always has the synthesis of conceptual comprehension as its informing and ultimate goal" (2002, 32).⁸

Halfway through "What Is the Epic Theater? (I)" we encounter a section that directly addresses the vibrating power that we are trying to circumscribe here. In it, Benjamin probes the function and effect of the projected drawings by stage designer Caspar Neher, which illustrated some scenes in Brecht's staging of his opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Quoting Brecht, Benjamin initially suggests that these projections "take a stand on the events on stage," whereby "the real Glutton," one of the opera's characters, acted in front of an unreal version, "a drawing" of himself, in the manner of one of the doubling commentaries that are central in epic theater (1991, 525). Immediately questioning this perspective, however, Benjamin wonders whether the projection might not be more real than the actor in this case. He then engages with the visual medium's always-already-thwarted but still all-important proximity to life, calling Neher's projections

“materialist ideas, ideas of actually existing ‘*Zustände*,’” and he holds that “as close as they have come to the proceeding [on stage, L.R.], the trembling of their outlines still betrays how much more intimate the proximity is from which they have torn themselves free in order to become visible” (1991, 525). Benjamin moves from a literal understanding of trembling to a metaphorical one, from shakily projected slides to the pulsations of life that are both source and goal of the theatrical representation. Associating Neher’s projections with “*Zustände*,” Benjamin grants them the gestural quality of suspended tension. The projections are affected by the most minute back-and-forth movements of a vibration that give testimony to their constitution between life and representation. Vibration, that is, does not only characterize the “frozen unrest” of the gestural; it also characterizes the specific status of Neher’s projections inasmuch as they belong to the order of media. The order of media and the order of gestures thus correspond to each other. Benjamin was aware of both their proximity to and distance from life, and hence he valued their non-totalizing aesthetic.

In “What Is the Epic Theater? (I)” the trembling back-and-forth movement still resounds with the vitalist “lively flow” (Benjamin 1991, 521) of the stream of life, which Benjamin’s assessment of Brecht’s gestural project will gradually move away from. Benjamin both nods towards and rejects flow by embracing an aesthetic of *vibrant interruption*. This becomes obvious in the Messianic—but also faintly vitalist—figure that arises at the end of the first Brecht essay (Benjamin 1991); it will have disappeared in the second, more sober version. This figure illustrates the crucial function of astonishment within the first essay’s enquiries into dialectics at a standstill, as mystical reflex and founding impulse of philosophical insight, but one that is, here, always only momentary, enabled by constellations that configure themselves “in a flash.” The passage that I have in mind is the following one:

The blockage in the real flow of life, the instant where its course comes to a standstill, can be felt as an ebb: amazement is this ebb. Its actual object is dialectics at a standstill. It is the cliff from whose heights one looks down into that stream of things. . . . When, however, the stream of things breaks on this cliff of amazement, then there is no difference between a human life and a word. In epic theater both are only the crest of the wave. It lets being-there (*Dasein*) spray up from the bed of time and stand glistening (*schillernd*) for an instant in the void, before bedding down once again, anew. (Benjamin 1991, 531)

How should we interpret the difficult denial of difference “between a human life and a word” that forms the “cliff” or “crest” of this passage? To begin with, we might link it to Brecht’s radical engagement in the 1930s with the political justification of sacrificial death, which is put on show in plays like *A Man’s a Man* (*Mann ist Mann*) or *The Measure Taken* (*Die Maßnahme*). Yet we might also link the conflation of “life” and “word” to the instant of gestural formation as dialectical standstill, and to the ways in which it, in turn, binds body to meaning. This instant’s “glistening”—oscillating, vibrating—moment of stillness between previous and future flow is met by astonishment—astonishment about the striking evidence of an unforeseen, momentary constellation that will dissolve almost as soon as it has configured itself. The wonder of the instant is caused not least by its political promise—by the possibility that things may change their shape in the instant’s aftermath. What emerges is the belief in gestic theater’s potentiality, its investment in renewal, deflecting the stream of life and embedding it “anew” (cf. Müller-Schöll 2002, 170; Weber 2002, 35).⁹ Benjamin’s “instant in the void” is exemplary of his idea of “*Jetztzeit* (‘the presence of the now’),” in the words of Stanley Mitchell (1998, xviii), “a *nunc stans*, in which time stands still, where past and future converge not harmoniously, but explosively, in the present instant,” entailing the ability to “intervene in events, whether as politician or as intellectual, to ‘blast open the continuum of history’ (Sixteenth Thesis on the Philosophy of History).” The revolutionary moment, in Benjamin’s profane mysticism, is fixed-explosive (cf. Breton 1987, 19).

By 1939, the swelling of the sea will have turned into a performative dynamic of “spurts” and “shocks”; attention is drawn to “conventions” and to “gestus.” Gestures are no longer associated with instants “in the void,” but with “intervals,” which are “provided so that the audience can respond critically”—instead of with astonishment—“to the player’s actions and the way they are presented” (Benjamin 2006, 306). It is gesture’s quotability that engenders these intervals: “[A]n actor must be able to space (*sperr*) his gestures the way a typesetter spaces type” (305), in order to show them, show that he is showing them, and make them reproducible. Quotability thus embodies the epic theater’s open futurity. It is a translation into acting technique of the more diffuse potentiality that emerged, in “What Is the Epic Theater? (I)” in the trembling crest of the wave. Quotability asks us, once more, to rethink gesture’s edges as signatures of temporality. Weber finds in those edges analeptic and proleptic qualities. There is always a before and an after of gesture; yet quotability, even though it encompasses both, shifts its main emphasis to the latter, to gesture’s performed afterlives. Quotability means, according to Weber, that “the essence of the gesture is always yet to come; it belongs to the future, never simply to the present or to the past” (2002, 35). The quotability of gesture allows for critical revelations that arise from the repetition of the same gestural vocabulary in different situations, casting light on its status as socially conditioned “*gestus*”; but it also allows for repetitions in difference, pointing up the Brechtian “it could happen this way, but it could also happen the other way” (Benjamin 1991, 525). The gestural can thus be manipulated and potentially changed; it can be linked to one of those pleasures of epic theater that result, as Brecht writes in a passage quoted by Benjamin, from the experience that “one can allow oneself to be modified by one’s environment, and modify this environment in turn” (531). This suggests that just as much as “*Zustände*” are imprints of gestures, gestures are imprints of “*Zustände*”—a reciprocity that is seen, here, not only under the sign of determination, but in a more forward-looking sense that also embraces modification. In Benjamin’s account of Brecht’s practice, gestures are political in so far as they are inscriptions of power onto bodies, to use the Foucauldian terminology so familiar to us. Yet these political bodies are presented under premises that make it possible for them to re-inscribe power in turn. It is crucial to the success of this endeavor that the actor be able to expose his own acting. In a “mode of performance” that is “based on distancing” (Benjamin 2006, 307), gesture is no longer about individual expression; instead, it is made by convention and remade by the actor, drawing attention to a type of physically engrained conduct that is aware of its own constructedness.

Finally, the quotability that is associated with the “spacing” of gestures gives reason to speak of a more general principle of “spacing” in Benjamin’s 1939 account of Brecht. It emerges in the coarser rhythm of “spurts” and “shocks,” in the recognizable effect of gestural recurrence or alteration at different moments of a play, in the clean contours of the second essay’s gestic “intervals,” and also in this essay’s own much more neat and organized appearance. It also emerges in distancing techniques, which are met by a response of critical distance. As such, quotability magnifies, tidies up, and perhaps deliberately misquotes the micro-movement of trembling. Trembling’s back-and-forth insistence on its indebtedness to the before, and to the promises of the after, condenses the momentary energy of the unlikely, fleeting, and astounding moment. It is not, or not yet, a skillfully conducted practice of highly visible “spacing.” Does Benjamin’s reading of Brecht warrant an understanding of vibration as counterpart, but also as initiating, minimal moment of quotational gestural agency? As the astonishing mystical core of a revolutionary élan indebted, in Brecht, to intellectual critique and to a sober kind of thinking that “crystallize[s] out into essentials” before it can be “made practice” (Mitchell 1998, ix)? Benjamin never developed trembling into a consistent or dominant strand of his thinking, despite its beautifully subtle exposure of dialectics at a standstill.

Rudolf von Laban and Gestural Flow

If Benjamin is the thinker of gestural interruption, Laban is the thinker of gestural flow. This flow derives from a vibratory energy that now enters center stage. For the dancer, choreographer,

teacher, and dance thinker, dance did not just include gestures; it was a genuinely gestural event and experience, which gave expression to the human condition, and made visible and performed the flow of life. Dance experience makes available insights into a world that “gives” or discloses itself “in the rhythms of gesture” (Laban 1920, 38, 44), Laban writes in his first major programmatic publication *The Dancer’s World* (*Die Welt des Tänzers*) of 1920, which will serve as my main reference in the following. “Gesture” is a translation here of the German “*Gebärde*,” a word that was then used more often than the term “*Geste*,” and which denoted both the manifestations of singular gesticulations and, in vitalist discourse, a holistic gesture-like expressivity of the entire body, and of larger, indeed virtually of all dynamic phenomena of life (cf. Thora 1992). It is the latter, vitalist notion that Benjamin and Brecht are dismantling by turning to interruption, and to the construction of the gestural by convention that is implied in the term “*gestus*.” Laban himself later included a stronger focus on the manipulation of gesture in his theory of “Effort,” yet he did not do so in order to develop a Brechtian aesthetic. Collaborating in the 1940s with management consultant Frederick Lawrence in the UK, he was interested in a more balanced use of energy in movement, to increase “enjoyment of work through the awareness and practice of its rhythmic character” (Laban and Lawrence 1947, xi; cf. Reynolds 2007, 5–6). What can be observed with regard to Laban’s early theory of dance is the relevance of both the all-encompassing understanding of gesture—of gestural dance in a gestural world—and the more particular acknowledgment of gesticulation, of an aesthetic shift away from the virtuosity of the feet and legs, toward a fine-tuned expressivity of the arms and hands (cf. Laban 1920, 94, 227, 255; Ruprecht 2010).

Gesture in Laban is by definition dynamic:

The elements of each gesture are made up of bodily tensions, which arise out of stirrings of the mind or the soul. We distinguish bodily tensions according to the spatial directions which determine their path, according to the effort that leads them towards specific points in space, and according to the longer or shorter durations which organize their succession. (Laban 1920, 17)

This intrinsically dynamic nature of the gestural is the reason for Laban’s aversion to dance photography, which he uses only sparingly in *The Dancer’s World*. He insists upon having picked out images that suggest a “before and an after” of the specific tension that they portray (Laban 1920, 257).¹⁰ Where Laban talks about what he considers a more meaningful form of stillness than the photographic one, he understands it as different kind of movement, rather than an absence of movement: “[T]he opposite of movement is stillness,” he claims; yet stillness too is considered to be “full of tensions” (1920, 219). We feel reminded of Benjamin’s “dialectics at a standstill,” although Laban does not touch upon this notion’s theoretical reach. Laban’s main interest is not with the instant of paradoxically suspended tension, but with the succession of transient states, and even more so with the transience of succession that is at the heart of dance. If the experience of dance makes insight available, this is not a matter of contemplating something that needs to hold still for this purpose, if barely for a moment; Laban’s dancerly insight, moreover, has little in common with Brechtian critical detachment. On the contrary, it cannot be disengaged from embodied experience; it is, first and foremost, tied to modes of understanding self and world that are enabled by the act of dancing, and only in a secondary step to dance’s display.

Whether in “solid form,” as in the visual arts, or in “fluid, ever-changing shape,” as in “dance, music and poetry,” however, gesture is celebrated as the basis of any expressive activity, and as a “carrier of symbolic acting” or “agency” (*Handlung* and *Handeln*) (Laban 1920, 163).¹¹ The abstract bodily engagement with different tensions, spatial directions, and uses of effort, then, testifies to the unconscious “psychic work” that brings about “movement ideas” like swinging downwards, fueled by “fear, cunning, courage, desperation and many other feelings,” or “swinging upwards,” releasing “comfort, joy, energy and so on” (71). Such gestural movement by the dancer may find its purpose within itself, or in “producing an impact on other individuals” (72).

This is where vibration enters Laban's theory of gesture. In Laban, vibration does not manifest itself in literally trembling performers on stage, but in the invisible yet ubiquitous "currents which are constantly moving between bodies" (1920, 16), which affect each dancer and are ideally perceived by every audience. The dancer is at once seismographic receiver and transmitter of these "currents" or "waves." "We perceive the image of a gesture," Laban writes:

... light waves carry it towards our eyes. We hear the image of a gesture trembling at our ear (*an unser Ohr zittern*). We also grasp ... the shape that the tension of a thought takes on when it is transferred by unknown currents, which are neither air waves nor light waves, and which speak without sounds or signs. (Laban 1920, 31)

The Ascona environment had been a hub not only for artists and intellectuals, but also for practitioners of occultism, and Laban's ideas about the impact of dance were influenced by the occultist belief in the "fourth dimension" of "cosmic energy storage" in the mysterious substance of the "ether" (Dalrymple-Henderson 2002, 131), which had gained currency in the theosophical movement that found rich breeding ground on the Monte Verità (cf. Doerr 2008, 30–31; Guilbert 2000, 41). A text that has often been discussed with regard to theosophy and occultism, Wassily Kandinsky's highly influential 1912 treatise *On the Spiritual in Art* devotes various passages to the vibratory power of visual art; but it also puts forth the idea that dance too should strive for creating "finer spiritual vibrations" (1946, 86). Laban's early theory of vibratory gestural dance develops such strands of thought in striking ways. Putting it in phenomenological terms, he elaborates an idea of perpetual being-with or interchange with respect to the art of the body: "... every impression (*Eindruck*) is the resonance (*Mitschwingen*, literally swinging or swaying together) of the expressive gesture of something that we are experiencing and that reaches us inside. Those memories of gestures are then projected outwards in turn, finding resonance (*Mitgehen*, *Mitschwingen*) there" (1920, 52).¹² Interestingly, Laban connects stillness or interruption in dance to such moments of perception or impression, calling them "invisible, inaudible, unperceived gestures," "internal gestures in-between two external gestures" (1920, 52). The body is thus constantly in a state of "stirring" (*Erregung*), affected by and affecting others through a type of vibrating energy or "pulsation": "The unceasing pulsation of the body reproduces itself in circular waves, expanding into the world. The body emits into space its own pulse or the waves of a foreign pulse which are breaking on it" (Laban 1920, 47).

Laban's 1926 *Gymnastics and Dance* (*Gymnastik und Tanz*), then, defines the purpose of such experiences of pulsation as a "refinement" of the "social life of the soul," and as the fostering of a "desire for harmony." They stimulate a "force which enables us to resonate forever with the primordial universal dance of being" (1926, 162–63). Laban wanted "to exalt a cult of harmony by means of dance" (Doerr 2008, 59), which found its most emblematic expression in the natural synchronicity of his movement choirs. The dance critic Fritz Böhme, later a fervent defender of Aryan dance, writes about the choirs that those who participated wanted

... to experience space by way of bodily processes that correspond to cosmic ones, by their breath, their pulse, the tension of their limbs, the swings of their arms and legs, the impulse of their torso; striving for oblivion in the experience of swinging together, they want to feel themselves in the movement of mutual exchange, by physically responding to the gestures of their fellow dancers. (1926, 174)

Benjamin's notion of "innervation" might be usefully juxtaposed—and distinguished—here. It refers to the body as receptive and productive of nervous impulse. "Innervations," as Carrie Noland explains with reference to Theodor Adorno's reception of the term, stimulate "the nerves of a bodily part, and thus allow the body to achieve a certain awareness and knowledge of itself" (2008, ix). Even though innervation resounds with vibratory modernism's widespread interest in pulsations, Benjamin's notion maintains itself at a remove from any kind of esotericism. The physiological

nature of the phenomenon did not prevent him from considering it in historical and political terms, as an individual and collective phenomenon. Benjamin developed the notion in his writings on the corporeal quick-wittedness of the gambler, and addressed the ways in which metropolitan life affects innervation in Edgar Allan Poe's and Charles Baudelaire's studies on urban physiognomies (Benjamin 2005, 297–98; 2006a, 3–92). When using it in his film theory, Benjamin aligned innervation with technology, thus offering an antidote to vitalism's belief in natural processes of transference. As Hansen has shown, the 1936 version of Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" addresses "the imbrication ... of human perceptual-physiological impulses and mechanical structures," linking "the idea of collective innervation" not to an all-encompassing gestural force, but to the technically mediated "*démontage* of the individual" (Hansen 2004, 24). The screen actor becomes the prime site for this procedure. A screen actor is able to "spark *collective* innervation at the level of *reception*, in the corporeal space of the audience assembled in the theater," but she does so not through a direct rapport with this audience, but through a rapport with the apparatus, putting her under the stress of a "unique kind of mechanized test" that involves a "morcelization and recomposition of the actor's being" (Hansen 2004, 24). Benjamin's engagement, in this version of the Artwork essay, with "processes of mimetic identification specific to cinema" (Hansen 2004, 24) that allow for such innervation aims at enhancing sensuous experience; but it also toys with the idea of "adapting the human sensorium to the regime of the apparatus" (18), preparing it for modernity's complex demands on sense and motor reactions, not least with regard to mobilizing a collective body for leftwing revolution. The 1929 essay entitled "Surrealism" is most explicit about this option, portraying an "explosive charge-become-flesh in the body of the revolutionary collective" (Weigel 1996, 19):

Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extend demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*. (Benjamin 2005a, 217–18)

Benjamin modified his belief in collective innervation in the canonic third version of the Artwork essay, which was completed in 1939. Detaching their political consciousness from communal stirring to take on intellectually distanced positions, audiences are now "assumed to side, in a more Brechtian fashion, with the testing gaze of the camera" (Hansen 2004, 25), observing—and ideally acting upon—"their own alienation," as well as on the "oppressive character of history" (26). This trajectory recalls the move from the reaction of astonishment in the 1931 version of the Brecht essay to that of critical distance in the 1939 version.

In their fundamental openness to political instrumentalization, collective pulsation and innervation bear ambivalent potential—a danger that Laban, in contrast to Benjamin, embraced in order to provide his new philosophy of dance with the highest possible public exposure in both left-wing and proto-fascist, and finally in National Socialist, contexts (cf. Guilbert 2000; Kant and Karina 2003).¹³ In the 1920s, Laban's movement choirs were performed across the political spectrum, at festivities of the worker's movement, but also at events at the far-right end of the life reform movement, such as the festivals of the nationalistic and anti-Semitic colony of Klingenberg (cf. Doerr 2008, 92–3, 110). *The Dancer's World* does not include comments on this political ambivalence. Here, Laban closes his early musings on pulsation with a pseudo-scientific paragraph on the various frequencies of optical, acoustic, and electromagnetic waves, and the perceptible or imperceptible trepidations that they cause in the organism, embedding in physics his metaphysical theory of dancery vibration. Given Laban's interest in the gradations of vibrating waves, what we find in *The Dancer's World* on the impact of dance is a single theme in many variations: from imperceptible yet effective micro-movements to the above-mentioned, fully formed swings of the dancers; from metaphorical to physical responses of resonance or swinging-together of performers and audience, man and world.¹⁴

At least in theory, vibratory transmission of energy through dance was endowed with a high degree of effectiveness. It was not only associated with movement choirs, but also with soloist performance. Dee Reynolds quotes Rudolf Lämmel, pedagogue, physicist, and father of modern dancer Vera Skoronel, who writes about Wigman: “I consider that from such a mental tension, of which only the inspired dancer is capable, an energy current radiates, which grips and excites similarly tuned souls” (2007, 64). And Böhme holds, “Before Mary Wigman’s creations, the viewer was reborn as someone who resonates with what he sees, someone who is drawn into the rhythm of the movement that is being formed by the body from the inside out” (1926, 18). Yet we also find reviews of the same dancer that testify to the contrary, like the following one by “M-L,” which appeared in *Der Tag* on November 9, 1926, under the heading “Blüthnersaal. Mary Wigman dances”: “Mary Wigman does not possess the power to tear down the final barrier between herself and the viewer. . . . her dances do not create that charged atmosphere which forces the nerves of the audience to receive the nervous vibrations of the dancer.”

Mary Wigman’s Vibrato

Leaving behind processes of transmission, we are now approaching a very literal understanding of vibratory energy. It was Wigman, and not Laban, who actively took possession of vibration, turned it into a practice, and introduced it as an actual mode of movement into her choreographic vocabulary. If, as Dalrymple-Henderson (2002) shows, painters had started to draw vibrations, dancers caught up and started to perform them. The most extensive description of the initiating moment of Wigman’s engagement with vibration can be found in a series of interviews that were commissioned in 1972–1973 by the GDR Academy of the Arts, conducted by Gerhard Schumann. Looking back at the development of her movement technique, Wigman recounts:

I would like to tell you about a discovery of which I thought that it had been my own; but I learned very soon that it was an age-old discovery of dancing humankind, I called it vibrato. I had torn a muscle and could not dance. And I wanted to resume my work, but I could not jump any more. My ability to jump was gone. It would never come back. . . . I was not desperate, I always used to try all sorts of things to maintain control of my body. One day I discovered that I was actually in a constant state of quiet, up-and-down vibration. My entire body was in this state, from my feet up to my head. I thought: how beautiful! How wonderful! What is this? An invention? It was exactly this which replaced my ability to jump, and which I developed in its stead. . . . the vibrato emerged. It possesses this unbelievable wealth of possibilities, because it allows for differentiation. The most detailed details! . . . Later I suddenly saw an African ballet which included it [the vibrato, L. R.], they could do it in such magnificent manner that I almost went green with envy and I thought to myself: you are so deluded! You are priding yourself on inventing something. (1982, 48)

While acknowledging her kinetic participation in something bigger than her own idea, Wigman is still keen on emphasizing the personal creative process that made her discover vibration. Less interested in physics and physiology, and further away from the occultist spirit of the beginning of the century, she is fascinated by the kinetic possibilities of the quality that she recognized in the African dancers whose performance she witnessed.¹⁵ Choosing the musical term vibrato for her find, it is clear that her mind was set on playing her instrument well. Considering the translation into dance of the “rapid and minute fluctuations in pitch” that characterize musical vibrato, Mary Anne Santos Newhall writes that

Wigman’s vibrations were achieved through a buoyant vertical bounce of the body, sometimes slight and at times more vigorous, either with the whole body or with a single body part. The vibration usually was done travelling across the floor, with many variations, from a light, lifted vibration on the balls of the feet to a deeper

bounce with the whole foot placed firmly against the floor. The vibration was achieved through a release in the ankles and a resilience in the knees and hips that was supported by a resonating, lightly panting breath. (2009, 144)

To return once more to the visual arts and their occultism-inspired engagement with vibration: if some painters were driven by the belief in the “clairvoyant” (Dalrymple-Henderson 2002, 128) potential of art to make visible the invisible, Wigman relates the vibrato not to an urge to *see*, but to *sense* more, approaching this sensing in a thoroughly embodied (and less metaphorical) fashion than Laban. When her interview partner suggests that the contained bouncing may have something to do with the wish to transcend gravity despite her injury, she speaks instead of “[a]n ever increasing sensitivity down to the fingertips, to the tip of the nose, everywhere . . .” (1982, 48). Wigman pupil Hanya Holm describes the acquisition of the movement quality as extensive kinesthetic exercise:

We found the answer to it while sitting on a sofa a whole night, with the springs helping us to bounce back. Then, on our feet without any outward help, the demands of the momentum carried us gradually further until the repetition of the movement finally broke down any mental opposition, and vibration became a true experience for us. (Sorrell 1969, 18)

Documents and testimonies show that the vibrato entered Wigman’s teaching, and also her choreographies (cf. Manning 2006, 93; Stöckemann 2011, 164–65), for instance the 1926 version of *Witch Dance* (Hexentanz), where it seems to have occurred during the second half. Rudolf Bach describes a “sustained tremor” (*Bebend-Gehaltene[s]*), “flapping” of fingers, and “wild shaking” of the arms (1933, 30–1). Around the same time, Böhme calls Wigman’s dances a “world of movement born out of inner vibration” (1926, 21). Vibrato also makes striking later appearances, most prominently in Wigman’s 1957 production of *Le Sacre du printemps*, which includes powerful sequences of a seated type of bouncing.¹⁶ The choreographer might have taken her cues here from the original 1913 version of *Sacre* by Vaslav Nijinsky, who famously, and for the first time in the history of Western concert dance, put vibrating bodies on stage. A brief excursus on Nijinsky’s vibrations provides a foil for further carving out the specificities of Wigman’s vibrato.

Jacques Rivière considered interruption, the fact that “the movement stop[s] and start[s] again” (1983, 119), one of the overarching concepts of Nijinsky’s choreography. Vibration was this concept’s most minute self-representation. Or, as Lepecki formulates slightly differently, “In the rendition of *Le Sacre du printemps* that Rivière gives us, stillness emerges in Nijinsky’s treatment of the body as temporally fragmented” (2000, 342). Following Rivière, Lepecki has enquired into this kind of modernist standstill as one that is affected by, and moves over into vibration, forming an initiating yet still marginal moment of dance. In Nijinsky’s *Sacre*, stillness is used in a thoroughly stylized way. It had its most prominent occurrence during those instances in the second act where The Chosen One waits to start her final sacrificial dance. A powerful rendering of anxiety, apprehension, and active acquiescence, of, in Rivière’s words, “frightful waits” (1983, 123), The Chosen One’s stillness ended in the first vibrations of what was to come. Marie Rambert shows in her autobiography how close stillness was to vibration, how, as Lepecki puts it, vibration might have been “inscribed in stillness just to make immobility visible” (2000, 350). Rambert describes the dancer as “standing on the spot trembling for many bars” (1972, 64). In her review for *Comœdia Illustré* in June 1913, Marguerite Casalonga in turn perceived the posture as a trajectory from the quiet body to the vibrating one: “Suddenly, the dancer . . . wakes up again, her body vibrates on the spot, at first only a little, then more, her gestures become larger, her dance expands, she jumps, the movements of her head and her upper body become more accentuated” (474). Vibration is seen here as fully expressive, being read beyond its movement interest as fearful trembling: the body’s “ways of . . . shaking itself frenetically on the spot . . . convey ever so much” (1983, 120), according to Rivière. But Rivière also thought that it presented a new kind of grace, a “trembling descending like a wave from the dancers’ heads to feet” (122).

It must remain open to speculation whether Nijinsky would have gone on to establish vibrating as a stable element within his choreographic vocabulary. Reviewers of his *Sacre* considered trembling to be the minimal and arguably unsettling, anxious core of increasingly formed movement, building up into bigger and more pronounced dancing. If Nijinsky introduced a new, angular modernist gestural vocabulary, reviews suggest that his shivering dancers indeed both enriched and destabilized this vocabulary from its margins. This type of formal destabilization or even damage through the diffuse impact of microscopic action does not have an obvious place in Wigman's aesthetic, however. Wigman did not see her vibrato as a potentially disruptive miniature version of something more expansive. We do not know whether she actually explored the micro-vibrations of trembling in the second half of her *Witch Dance*; yet she used variations of what she also called bouncing (*Federn*) in her teaching and her recitals as elements in their own right. The circle of female dancers in Wigman's *Sacre* who are performing their seated, rhythmical vibrato do not exactly shiver; their up-and-down movement of the torso is highly pronounced. They give an impression of festering determinacy, rather than anxious expectancy, as in the trembling sequence of Nijinsky's *Chosen One*. At least in her *Sacre*, Wigman seems to have avoided those minute forms of vibrating where it gains the blurry, hard-to-grasp energy that can be associated with a defective, but also with a disruptive and almost jubilatory, explosive charge, as in Benjamin's "glistening."

Lepecki has argued for vibratory standstill's first, tentative appearance in modernism, yet holds that it only later achieved actual technical and compositional qualities, such as in Steve Paxton's technique known as contact improvisation, with its emphasis on "introspective proprioception" (Lepecki 2000, 346). It is above all a new kind of perception of the body that Lepecki addresses. What interests him in this type of perception is its subjective, phenomenological, nearly immobile postmodernist counter-agency to the more objectivist, image-based project of dynamic modernist kinesthetics. Yet introspective proprioception and its development into technique and choreography already informed Wigman's modernism, in which the will to create body images was inextricably bound up with proprioceptive experience that produced movement from inside out, as it were; it neither opposed nor blindly affirmed kinesthetic dynamism, but made this dynamism manifold by including absent and present, slow and fast, small and large motion. Wigman's description of the discovery of vibration is one of intense perception; it was preceded by Laban's "internal gestures" or impressions of stillness, and foreshadows future accounts such as Paxton's, quoted by Lepecki, of "quite a lot of *minute movement*" in the performer's relaxed, upright body (2000, 344).

At the same time, the philosophy of vibrato can hardly be compared to such later emergences of the phenomenon, and the effect of Wigman's assured bouncing seems to have been different, too, from the quiet restlessness of Nijinsky, or T. S. Eliot, a passage of whose "Burnt Norton" opens Lepecki's essay.¹⁷ Lepecki introduces Eliot's point of vibrating stillness, to begin with, as a gaping wound and, with Roland Barthes, as a "fluttering punctum" that pricks "our attention" by both provoking and escaping interpretation (2000, 334). Wigman's vibrato, by contrast, does not seem to represent an injury to the symbolic order. She conceived it as remedy against actual physical vulnerability, yet her narrative about the discovery of the movement quality and her choreographic use of it abstain from acknowledging the disconcerting aspects of its emergence. Wigman does not rest within her phenomenological body for the purpose of developing a site of resistance to a more fully formed aesthetic of movement. She does not linger on the gap between the perceived vibratory stasis of her bodily perceptiveness and its translation into the larger dynamics of dancerly form, arguing instead for the seamless transformation of the sensuous self into a dancerly "*Gestalt*," which she puts on display to project images of power rather than fragility—an aesthetic that must be seen, too, within the frame of Wigman's feminist commitment to embody universal, rather than inferior positions of femininity (cf. Manning 2006). "It may happen that . . . experience and structure . . . inflame one another like lightning and so entirely penetrate one another that the execution and completion of the work do not encounter any hurdle," Wigman claims in *The Language of Dance (Die Sprache des Tanzes)* (1966, 13).

Wigman's interpretative framing of her production of *Sacre* echoes her philosophy of artistic creation. She links vibration, here, to the shivering transition from freeze to thaw, to the "twitching pain of the earth, whose . . . crusts break in order to make space for new life," evoking a vision of the creative person trembling with the hard but successful labor of giving birth to a work of art (Wigman n.d.). Wigman's trembling is a practice that "makes space." In other words, it is a practice of spacing that reminds one of Brechtian technique, without embracing Brechtian politics. Transforming flow into a series of spatial and temporal units, which can be taught, repeated, and performed in unison, Wigman's vibrato becomes a highly functional, even quotable artistic tool. Yet instead of using the vibrato for exposing sociohistorical conditions, she employs it together with the other elements of her dance language to portray transhistorical and archetypal contents, preserving the perennial rather than dismantling the contingent.¹⁸

Addressing more contemporary examples of performances of vibration, such as Meg Stuart's quivering bodies, Siegmund challenges Lepecki's alignment in his essay "Still" of the phenomenological body with subjective truthfulness, and the body image with the socially and kinesthetically imposed (2000, 412). If Wigman's vocabulary of vibration did not contravene, but enrich her gestural projections of creative power, a power which she was careful never to let slip from her hands, Siegmund's engagement with Stuart's approach to the vibrating body draws out this body's uncertain, unreadable status within a kinesthetic regime that is always already marked by a decentering loss of control. Such a contemporary kinesthetic gains its relevance from a position of mismatch with respect to the socially imposed; in other words, both phenomenological experience and dancery image-making infect and disrupt each other in scenes of vibratory unsettlement. Representing a type of intellectual critique that is based in the body, vibration thus enters movement vocabulary in order to perform a blurring of contours and a dissolution of form.¹⁹ As Brandstetter has it, it may have been an early encounter with just such a decentering force of collapse, a "massive appellation of corporeality" (1998, 17), whose energy made itself felt in the initiating moment of vibration in Nijinsky's *Sacre*. Judging from Bach's account, the second half of Wigman's *Witch Dance* may have tapped into this resource; yet the choreographer later tamed this force, channeling its unruly energy into a technique that turned injury into strength, reflex into mastery. Recalling the symbolism of artistic procreation that she chose for her *Sacre*, it is clear that Wigman's mind was set on sublimating the intimate, vulnerable aspects of vibration's materiality, its association with pleasure, fear, pain, or illness, with the suffering of severe cold and of exhaustion—deciding to take possession of trembling instead of being exposed to it. When witnessed in less composed forms in works by artists such as Stuart, it is arguably precisely this type of visceral trembling, of course, that affects—or astonishes—contemporary audiences so much, marking vibratory states that belong to a critical politics of the fragile, porous, perhaps explosive body (cf. Foellmer 2009), as opposed to Wigman's composed and ultimately always closed one.²⁰ Vibration, then, exemplifies Isabelle Launay's observation on the historically specific and therefore changing nature of "corporeity," which means that

... a particular movement, a particular figure cannot carry the same meaning in different epochs, to the extent that bodies and the organization of their co-ordinates are radically different, that motricity is no longer the same. (1996, 27; cf. Reynolds 2007, 13)²¹

As we have seen, vibration does not even carry the same meaning within a single epoch, although it may resound with similar currents of thought.

Conclusion

Let us summarize what we have observed. Benjamin's trembling is tied up with standstill—precisely that kind of standstill that allows for gesture to become visible as a unit with beginning and end. Yet at the same time, the trembling reminds us of the dialectical nature of this stillness as suspended

tension marked by forms of movement, by a dynamic previous life, and also an afterlife of gesture. Benjamin's "gestural imprints" are aware of their fragmentary, medial status—of the fact that they are torn from a life, which nevertheless still quivers at their margins, bearing its own revolutionary charge. The larger spacing—the reduced frequency—of the practice of gestural quotation contains, controls, and appropriates this oscillating, both self-aware and vitalist quivering, carving out its contours and granting it the agency that it needs to enter Brecht's political playing field—a field which Benjamin also characterizes as a theatrical "exhibition space" (*Ausstellungsraum*), a space for critical insight as opposed to a theatrical "space of spells" (*Bannraum*) (1991, 520). In Laban's *The Dancer's World*, by contrast, vibration remains fully within the vitalist paradigm, with its leaning toward the spellbound zones. It does not impinge on the formation of gesture, as both gesture and vibration belong to the same, ever-dynamic flow of life. Vibrations transport and transmit the stirrings that give those formations their specific shape, duration, and energy. Laban thus evokes the laws of physics to find a scientific framework for those occult experiences of swinging-together that were a crucial component of community-building in the life reform movement. His vibrations and pulsations affect bodies, and find expression through bodies in turn. Gestural agency then, in the shape of the above-quoted "symbolic acting," may arise in the premeditated performance of individuals; but the commitment of these individuals to freely express themselves must remain undecided. Dancers are conditioned in Laban's early writings by the reactive rather than active character of their permeability towards their environment.²² Instead of deciding to be expressive, or to consciously empathize with that which is being expressed, dancers and audiences thus open themselves up to an energy that is always already waiting to take them along. As is well known, Wigman shared Laban's vitalist belief in dancers (and viewers) as vessels of an overarching energy, which she simply called "dance" (cf. Huschka 2002, 178–97; 2012, 182–99). Echoing Laban, she holds: "Dance is all rhythmical swinging and flowing. Even the smallest gesture is carried along by the grand, infinite stream of movement" (1933, 19).

Laban's, and in even more pronounced ways, Wigman's philosophical approaches to dance are based on an understanding of the gestural dancer as *medium*, that is, which forcefully resounds with the spiritualistic overtones of the term. Benjamin's notion of innervation, of being receptive and productive of nervous impulse, touches upon this without lingering there for too long. In fact, his engagement with Brecht's theater leads to a *media theory of gesture*. In Benjamin's perspective, media open up room for experiment, literally "room for play" (*Spielraum*) (2006c, 127), exemplified by representational possibilities like cutting, slowing down, zooming in, or other types of intervention.²³ Such technological possibilities correspond to gesture's very own room for play. Benjamin thus speaks of Charlie Chaplin's "*gestus*," of his "staccato bits of movement" that apply "the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial function" (2006d, 94). They recall the self-exhibition of play-acting, and the defamiliarizing techniques of interruption, spacing, and quotability on the Brechtian stage. In Benjamin, the gestural flow of life, which remains the other side of technology, is faintly acknowledged, if ultimately crossed out, in the convulsive beauty (cf. Breton 1987, 19) of the images of the trembling outlines of Neher's projections, and the glistening crest of the wave. Benjamin's media theory of gesture situates the gestural within a force field that is made up of the tension between gesture's propensity to be technically manipulated and its acknowledgment of material and temporal continuities. Intellectual distance and astonishment constitute modes of responding to the gestural; both carry their own revolutionary sensibility. Contemporary dance's explorations of our phenomenological being-in-the-world as a basis for political critique seem to take up—and take further—Benjamin's cues. They subscribe to a new kind of critical vitalism whose modernist roots have been traced, here, between theory and dance practice.

Notes

I wish to thank Mark Franko and the anonymous reviewers from *Dance Research Journal* for their insightful suggestions on the first draft of my article. This work represents a portion of my current

book project on the “gestural imaginary” that arose at the beginning of the twentieth century in dance, literature, film, the visual arts, and cultural theory. My focus is predominantly on the Germanic context, and my driving questions are the following: what does it mean that gesture rises to such prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century? What kind of light or—keeping in mind Weimar film’s iconic gestural projections—shadow is cast on modernist aesthetics by the heterogeneous dynamic of gestural performance, and how does it correspond to and play a part in the experience of modernity?

1. Translations of some of the German sources are my own.
2. For a helpful discussion of the notion of *Ausdruckstanz*, see Franco (2007). Important recent contributions to a rethinking of modernist dance especially in the German context are Elswit (2014) and Giersdorf (2013, 49–57).
3. Giorgio Agamben’s brief yet highly influential remarks about gesture in two partly overlapping essays (1999, 2000) have drawn attention to this situation. Agamben’s main contribution to the rethinking of gesture is a historically situated claim and an ontological definition. The claim states the bourgeoisie’s ultimate loss of gesture at the end of the nineteenth century, and its subsequent attempt to recover—and, crucially, record—this loss in literary and scholarly projects, but also in the physical registers of dance and above all silent film. The ontological definition of gesture is based on this trajectory from readability to dysfunction and loss. Gesture, that is, is broken down by Agamben (2000) to the point of utmost emptiness, to being nothing else but the exhibition of its own media character, of pure and endless mediality. As Nikolaus Müller-Schöll has shown, this concept of mediality is a reference to Benjamin’s philosophy of language (2002, 70–87). However, Agamben does not engage with Benjamin’s enquiry into Brechtian interruption, which is why his approach remains not more than a backdrop for the present article.
4. For a discussion of this context with reference to dance, see Burkhalter (2011) and Baxmann (2000, 65–72).
5. For the first grand wave of gestural renewal in the shape of the eighteenth-century ballet reform, see Foster (1996) and Thurner (2012).
6. I am distinguishing between the ballerina’s trembling, i.e., her being off-balance, and her “active stillness.” For the latter, see Susan Jones’s (2013, 223–32) enlightening critique of Lepecki, which traces the static yet alert body in the *danse d’école*. See also Ness (2008, 16–8).
7. Benjamin also writes about gesture in his Kafka essay of 1934. His engagement with Kafka’s use of the gestural applies but also complicates and challenges Brechtian terminology, by pointing up its limited reach within Kafka’s literary world; see Benjamin (2005b, 794–818). See also Müller-Schöll (2002, 180).
8. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of a dialectics of the assemblyman (*monteur*), who disassembles and reassembles elements to draw out their most improbable points of rapport (2009, 94).
9. Dee Reynolds (2007, 35) has drawn attention to the figure of the wave in the thought of graphologist and life philosopher Ludwig Klages, whose work Benjamin knew. Klages’s interest in wave-like motion was not directed at the crest (i.e., the point of interruption) of this motion, but at the rhythmical change of peaks and troughs, which the thinker linked to life’s perpetual renewal. In Benjamin’s Brechtian wave, however, renewal has to be understood as Messianic and political, rather than ontological, category. For the relevance of the figure of the wave in modern dance, see also Burkhalter (2011).
10. Laban was, however, in favor of the dynamic medium of film; see Franco (2012).
11. For a sustained engagement with gesture and agency that draws on a different set of thinkers and artists, see Noland (2009).
12. For dance-induced processes of resonance in the cinematic context, see Köhler (2014).
13. For theories of leftwing revolution in and through dance, see Franko (1995, 25–37) and Hardt (2004).
14. Also note signature titles of Laban’s works such as *The Swinging Temple* (*Der schwingende Tempel*), 1922; *Vibrant Forces* (*Schwingende Gewalten*), 1923; and *Drive Dance* (*Schwungtanz*), 1923 (Doerr 2008, 219–21).

15. Compare Gabriele Brandstetter's discussion of Doris Humphrey's 1930 *The Shakers*, a piece that drew on the spiritual quality of vibration (1998, 15–6). In the account of Blanche Evan, who was a pupil at Hanya Holm's New York-based Wigman School, this spiritual quality jarred with her "intellectual make-up"; Evan describes a 1934 lesson on vibration in condescending terms as the "nearest thing to a primitive worship-cult celebration that I had ever experienced" (Manning 2006, 274).

16. Mary Wigman's version of *Le Sacre du printemps* was recently reconstructed under the direction of the choreographer Henrietta Horn, who was aided by Susan Barnett, Katharine Sehnert, Emma Lewis Thomas, and Brigitta Herrmann. The work was originally premiered at the municipal Opera Berlin in 1957 with the resident ballet company. It now returns to the stage in a large-scale collaboration performed by the dance ensembles of the municipal theaters Osnabrück and Bielefeld, and graduates of the Essen Folkwang School. I saw a performance of the reconstruction at Radialsystem Berlin on November 14, 2013, where it was shown on the occasion of the conference "Tanz über Gräben. 100 Jahre *Le Sacre du Printemps*," organized by Gabriele Brandstetter together with Alexander Schwan and Anne Schuh.

17. For a discussion of Eliot's poetics of dance, see Jones (2013, 223–49).

18. Proponents of Weimar dance like Valeska Gert or Lotte Goslar are closer to Brechtian politics than Laban or Wigman. Gert's and Goslar's performances remind one of Brechtian principles both formally and politically; for Gert, see Elswit (2012; 2014, 90–3); Foellmer (2006, 81–107); and Müller (2013). For Goslar, see Mozingo (2012).

19. For an alternative reading of vibrating bodies in Meg Stuart, see Foellmer (2009, 325–41).

20. While I value Reynolds's (2007, 43, 87) engagement with Wigman's "kinesthetic imagination" of a body that is continuous with its surrounding space, I believe that this was a matter of the dancer's practice of movement rather than of the body images that she evoked during her performances. Judging from the vast array of sources on Wigman, these body images were seen as precisely formed, clear cut, and highly controlled, lacking suggestions of blurring, coincidence, or other types of openness that indicate porous boundaries within the visual field.

21. See also Noland (2008, x): "Gestures *migrate* (as well as disappear) and . . . in migrating they create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences."

22. One of the most striking examples for this understanding of dance as reactive, rather than active, phenomenon is Laban's engagement with tropisms (i.e., the involuntary orientation by an organism or one of its parts toward a source of stimulation). Laban transposes this principle onto the dancing body within its energetic environment.

23. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2015) has shown how Benjamin's commitment to playful experiment through the possibilities opened up by media such as film and photography relates to his notion of "second technology" (*zweite Technik*). Second technology characterizes modernist art that has left behind its origins in ritual, sacrifice, and auratic cult, for embracing forms of technical manipulation such as reproducibility.

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