

**A Dancer Writes:**

**Fabian Barba  
on  
Mary  
Wigman's  
Solos**





*Photo 1. Fabian Barba in Wigman's Pastorale (photo: Bart Grietens).*

# Research into Corporeality

Fabian Barba

The first time I saw films of the Wigman solos on video, I experienced a vague, ambivalent feeling of recognition: something in these dances felt very familiar, although the choreography retained its historical strangeness seen through the eyes of a contemporary dance student. The uncanniness of the experience functioned as a powerful trigger to think about something that concerned me but that at first I couldn't fully understand. For one thing, it made me think of my dance education in Ecuador, and it occurred to me that there could well be significant similarities between *Ausdruckstanz* and Ecuadorian modern dance (I shall develop this idea at the end of this essay). In a personal research project in 2007, while studying at P.A.R.T.S. between 2004 and 2008, I learned and performed three of Wigman's solos: *Seraphisches Lied*, *Pastorale*, and *Sommerlicher Tanz*, from Mary Wigman's dance cycle *Schwingende Landschaft*. At that time I realized I was dealing with a totally different physicality for which my contemporary training was insufficient, and I had to seek different technical tools in order to perform these solos. First, I realized I had to develop other modes of muscular tension, as my training in release techniques did not suffice. Second, I was bound to consider movement not purely as a physical activity (I imagine that Wigman would have dismissed such an option as mere gymnastics) but rather as a tool for expressing a subtext. Despite these insights, my approach remained rather vague. The mere knowledge that I was dealing with a different physicality and mental involvement did not enable me to define them accurately.

During the 2008 ImpulsTanz Festival in Vienna, I participated in a two-week workshop with Susanne Linke, one of the last students of Mary Wigman in Berlin. Although she made clear that her class could not be considered as representative of Mary Wigman's approach, she did recognize its affiliation. In her workshop, I was introduced to a well-built and consistent system that provided clear technical tools that I could use to perform the Mary Wigman solos. These tools included exercises to relate the movement of the limbs to strong centric abdominal muscles; control of breathing, stressing the relation of inhalation and exhalation to different movement qualities; the suspension of an impulse in time to increase its dramatic tension; and the creation of movement phrases that foreground the dynamic tension between gravity and muscular resistance in clear geometrical shapes.

Irene Sieben and Katharine Sehnert—two other former students of Wigman in Berlin—taught me and helped me to practice the exercises they had learned in Wigman's school. I was surprised to discover how one of Wigman's movement principles, *gliding*, and all its possible variations, spontaneously produced some of the positions I had studied from still images. Thus, I came to understand how those body positions had been created, and I gained a sense of the logic that produced them. With this method for “producing” bodily

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**Fabian Barba** was born in Quito in 1982, where he studied dance and theater and worked as a professional performer. In 2004 he went to Brussels to study at P.A.R.T.S. After finishing his studies, he became a founding member of Busy Rocks, a collective based on artistic affinities that functions as an inspirational platform for a constant and durational work sharing. In the frame of Busy Rocks he has participated in the creation of *Dominos and Butterflies* and *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* and is currently engaged in the production of a new performance to be premiered in the 2011–2012 season. Besides the work with Busy Rocks, Fabian participated as a dancer in the creation of *You've changed* by Zoo/Thomas Hauert and will join in the creation of *Danza Permanente* by choreographer DD Dorvillier.

positions I was freed from working with a set and limited lexicon. Equally importantly, I was taught the *savoir-faire* that underlies a specific corporeality. Small instructions like “you move thinking you’re pressing the air in front of you,” or “you bend this part of your chest and not that one,” or, even better, “don’t let your arms hang like that behind you, bring them into the movement,” are invaluable sources of information as one tries to embody a specific historical corporeality. In the Wigman school students would practice just one of these movement principles at a time to explore all its variations throughout an hour-and-a-half class. In that way the experience of the class, although based in clear physical terms, could attain a heightened state of perception of the body and movement.

This work provided me with an insight into the notion of *subtext* and how it can be produced through movement. This has been an important, though not so easy, notion to grasp, and even more difficult to learn to work with. Wigman’s solos of the 1930s were presented as abstract dances, and yet they were supposed to communicate something to the audience. That *something* always remained vague, as though it did not need to be pointed out or explained in words. That *something* present in the solos is what we could call a “subtext.” Working with Katharine, Irene, and Susanne I have been able to see and experience how that subtext can be created and articulated through breath control, or through the suspension of a movement, or through a sharp muscular accent, to mention a few examples. Although it is called “text,” the subtext is physical, not verbal.

These classes made evident for me the fact that research on corporeality could provide an important source on which to base the work of reconstruction, as a crucial addition to archival and textual sources. By trying to recuperate this specific corporeality that is meant to be presented live before a contemporary audience, another important element appears: what I shall call the theatrical contract established with the audience. Spectators living at the beginning of the twentieth century were acquainted with the representational codes current at that time. Those codes determined the general aesthetics and structure of various productions. I am interested in what would happen if a dance public at the beginning of the twenty-first century were to be confronted with these representational codes that are now part of dance history. At first they might just seem strange, even arbitrary; but is there a possibility that their strangeness might contaminate the codes and expectations we actualize nowadays, of which we are not even fully aware? To what extent could such an experience inform further reflections on current representations of the body and conceptions of dance? In this way, too, reenactment participates in scholarly investigation into history and culture.

If I want to tackle these elements—corporeality, codes of choreographic composition, and theatrical contract with the audience—in my research and stimulate discussion around these questions, one particular strategy seems to be the most appropriate because it encompasses all of them: the reenactment of a dance evening as it could have taken place in the first half of the twentieth century. I have therefore chosen to compose/present a dance program based on Mary Wigman’s first tour of the United States in 1930–31. In her performances on that tour, Wigman would combine several solos (each of which had a length ranging from three to seven minutes), mainly sourced from two dance cycles: *Schwingende Landschaft* (the most prominent in the program) and *Visionen*. From the first cycle I work with the solos entitled *Anruf*, *Seraphisches Lied*, *Gesicht der Nacht*, *Pastorale*, *Sommerlicher Tanz*, and *Sturmlied*. From the second cycle, two or three solos will be selected from among *Raumgestalt*, *Feierliche Gestalt*, *Traumgestalt*, and *Zeremonielle Gestalt*. I will also work with the solo *Drehmonotonie* from the dance cycle *Feier*, which was extremely popular with audiences in the United States.

The work of reconstruction generally implies a negotiation between two poles. On the one side, a faithful and accurate reproduction could be sought in order to gain a full understanding of the original performance. On the other side, there is the possibility of highlighting the interpretative gap that exists between the reconstruction and the original, and difficulties in reassembling, reading, and embodying the historical material can be reflected within the restaging. These two approaches meet in the acknowledgment that exact reconstruction is impossible: certain alterations of the original performance cannot be avoided. With this in mind, the question becomes: *Instead of mourning the loss of a supposed original performance, how can we turn the tension between original and reconstruction into a constructive and positive artistic proposal? How can we make the unavoidable modifications the very expressive matter of the reconstruction?*

To say that modifications are unavoidable puts into question any pretension to authenticity. In this project, though I care about accuracy, I mainly strive to reproduce a theatrical illusion, with all the fiction that implies, as if I my aim were not so much to produce an “authentic reproduction” but an “illusion of authenticity.” This is perhaps the sense of the term “reenactment” as distinct from reconstruction, which is a methodology behind reenactment. Yet, I’d like to stress that accepting the inevitability of alterations is



not to give license to unbridled interpretations. The qualification of “unavoidable” is not to be taken lightly. Rather, the rigor with which the original choreography is understood will shape and define thoroughly the alterations that will take place. To take the unavoidability of alterations as a justification for a loose approach to the original would weaken both its understanding and the reconstruction’s artistic proposal. What might these alterations be, what would produce them, how can they be accounted for?

Within my corporeal and reconstructive research, these alterations emerge as tools that may enable us to learn more about the way that contemporary practices relate to this historical heritage and its modernist traits. My aim is to explore this topic by developing two parallel lines: theoretical research as well as body-based inquiry. I will focus on the aesthetic features of *Ausdruckstanz* and their relation to the historical context, ideology, and social sensibilities of the time. At the same time, through the research on corporeality, I will trace the way in which modernism was inscribed in the bodies of these dance practitioners.

Reenactment allows us to approach these topics through a notion central to *Ausdruckstanz*: *lived experience*. This notion fulfils a double function. First, lived experience is the point of departure for the artist who relies on it during the improvisations that lead to the conception of the final choreography. Second, lived experience is what is at stake during the actual performance: the public and the dancers should be involved in a mutual, subjective experience mediated by the dance. To be able to observe these dances live will hopefully produce an experience that not even film can provide us with.

And yet, film is a very useful archival source when it comes to the retrieval of historical material. Rhythmically, film can give a clear idea of the relative speed of the movement, information that it is hard to imagine being provided by another medium, although it is necessary to question at every moment—for example, if a given accent pertains to the movement or to a jump between film frames. Visually, film can register a clear, detailed, and complete movement score. Small movements, such as an accent with the head or a little shift of the weight, are portrayed in a way that cannot be captured in a series of photos. In this portrayal of movement, however, film does not escape a limitation inherent to photography as well: the image of Wigman is flattened into two dimensions, turning the body into an icon. The most

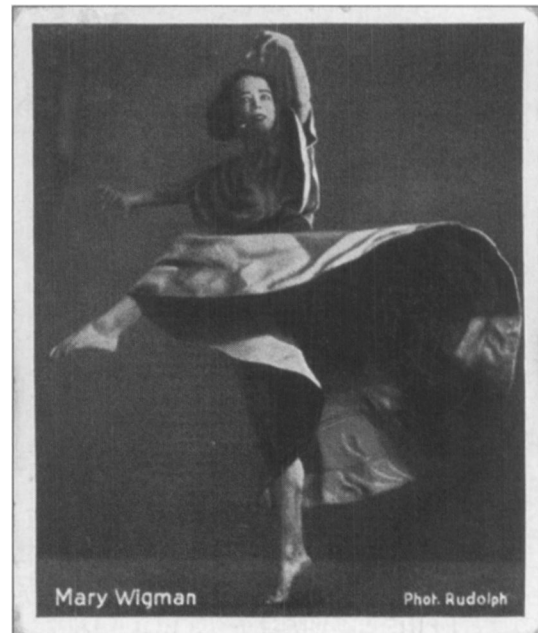
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Photo 2. Fabian Barba in “Wigman’s Pastorale (photo: Bart Grietens).



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Photo 3. Mary Wigman on a tobacco card of the album *Der Künstlerische Tanz (The Artistic Dance)*, issued in 1933 by the Dresden cigarette factory Eckstein-Halpauss.



immediate and important consequence is that the body loses its “body-ness,” its corporeality. When I learned the solos from film sources, although I learned the movement and shapes with such precision as to be able to dance in unison with the image on the TV screen, people I had invited to see the rehearsals didn't seem convinced with my execution. The main reason was that my muscular tone did not match that of Mary Wigman. A slowing down movement can have either a suspending/floating or an air-resisting quality, for example, and this can easily be misread. Film and photos can very much aid the recreation of a movement score but fail to convey with precision a most important feature of movement: its muscular qualities. Nevertheless, this information is not completely lost. Corporeality can somehow be perceived from the image, for my audience could say that my muscular tone was not matching that of Wigman. The challenge then is to be able to retrieve that information.

I remember a working session in which Marc Vanruxt helped me to study a position photographed from *Sommerlicher Tanz*. As he placed my arm or my pelvis or my head, I could feel a change in the distribution of muscular tension in my body. Although I wasn't working to get the “right” muscular tone, it was clear that a particular muscular tone was necessary to reach that specific position. Thus, I gained a working approach based not on an external image but on the proprioception of my body; while passing through that position in the dance, I could look for the specific stretch and tension I had felt during the rehearsal.<sup>1</sup>

I don't want to appear to be undervaluing texts. Dance scholars and historians have paid a great deal of attention to the *Ausdruckstanz* tradition, and certainly their work is extremely useful for my study.<sup>2</sup> However, I do not want my reconstruction practice and the resulting reenactment to be a mere illustration of existing theories. It is therefore necessary for me to position my work in such a way that it can benefit from, but also add to, critical thinking. Dance scholars create reconstructions of the solos they are analyzing as a way to ground their discursive and theoretical formulations. They rely on archival information such as film (if any exists), photos, descriptions, critical reviews, interviews with people involved, etc. I will make use of the same tools. The crucial difference is that the reconstructions of academic discourse are mainly textual. Generally they offer descriptions of how the original performance looked and how its plot developed as well as information about the public's initial reaction and the artist's intention. The experiential realm of dance appears to get lost once it is transposed into words.

Considering this hermeneutic shortcoming of scholarly writing in the realm of historical dance traditions, the significance of my project emerges. My work will focus on the specific corporeality developed by Mary Wigman. Instead of describing, I will be *reenacting* and thus recovering that which necessarily escapes theoretical formulations in corporeal terms. To reenact a movement implies more than copying shapes and rhythms. A movement and its quality are produced through a technique, a specific *savoir-faire*. By focusing on this specific aspect of Mary Wigman's practice, this work might find its place among other attempts to analyze the tradition of *Ausdruckstanz*.

In terms of other textual sources, Wigman's book *The Language of Dance* (1986) is an important reference in approaching the subtexts of the solos. There, Wigman explains her perception of those solos and unveils her inspirations, processes, and memories. This text allows me to get an insight into the dances and offers the possibility of reconstructing their subtext. So, written sources not only help to reconstruct the subtexts of the solos but also outline the main principles of Wigman's artistic proposal. In her theoretical writings on the art of dancing, one can find the motivations, purposes, and strategies that shaped her artistic proposal both in abstract and pragmatic matters. Understanding this logic satisfies not just a theoretical interest but also informs a practical need to reapply that logic in the recreation of the dances in order to protect their adherence to the universe from which they derive.<sup>3</sup>

Trying to understand the context, values, and strategies that shaped the creation of the solos necessarily involves an element of imagination. Indeed, in this project imagination plays an important role. The imaginative process is nurtured both by the information provided by the sources and by the presumptions and common knowledge I share with my contemporaries. The main danger in relying on imagination is that it can easily lead us to misinterpretation or simply to the familiar. In challenging and grounding the work with imagination, the vast bibliography on Wigman's work appears as another indispensable source. Thus, the imaginative proposition that something *might have been this way* is grounded on the rigorous research conducted by dance scholars and by the acts of imagination they themselves produced out of their work.

Wigman's solos sought to enact what was proper to the dance medium, questioning the nature of movement, dance's representational strategies, and the relation of dance to music. Being educated in Hellerau and Monte Verita, her work sought to break with the bourgeois conventions of the opera houses

and ballet. Thus, her very first solo recital was performed in silence, rejected a recourse to narrative as a way to unify the choreography, and used costumes not as a decorative element but as a function of the *Gestalt* produced by different and defined movement qualities.

The notion of the *Gestalt* points to a second key element of Mary Wigman's early solos: her subversive approach to the staging of gender. In contrast to the tradition of classical ballet or the contemporary work of Isadora Duncan, Wigman did not represent a female persona in her solos. Her dances could be better described as the construction of a *Gestalt*, understood as a specific movement quality assuming actuality in a particular space. Although this movement quality could be described as enacting a masculine, feminine, or neuter energy, Wigman's strategy allowed for dissociation between the actual gender of the performer and the gender attributed to the *Gestalt*. The use of masks and costume-as-a-mask was important in the construction of the *Gestalt* in as much as it allowed the particular features of the male or female performer's body to be concealed.

In *Schwingende Landschaft* we see a shift from the construction of *Gestalten* to the staging of female personas. Within this context, the fact that a male dancer performs four highly feminine solos does not contradict the original proposal but rather adds a peculiar tension that reflects the initial gender rhetoric of Wigman's earlier works. The ascription of coded feminine movements and energy to a female performer as if they would correspond to her naturally is once again put into question, much in the same way that Wigman questioned the possible stage representations permitted to women at the beginning of the century. Thus, the highly feminine personas of *Anruf*, *Seraphisches Lied*, *Pastorale*, and *Sommerlicher Tanz* are transformed once again into *Gestalten*, enacting the principle that the quality of movement and energy performed in space can be dissociated from the gender of the actual performer. The abandoned principle of the mask is reclaimed in these solos, whereby costumes are not the normal and natural clothing for a female body but rather costumes-as-masks hiding the particular features of the performer so as to enhance the creation and on-stage appearance of the *Gestalt*.

### **Ausdruckstanz and Modern Dance in Quito**

It is my hypothesis that modern dance in Quito has closer affinities with *Ausdruckstanz* than with any other historical dance tradition; Klever Viera and Wilson Pico have confirmed this for me.<sup>4</sup> First of all, Pico told me he considered himself an unofficial heir of Mary Wigman. Further, I refer to a dance festival organized in Quito during the nineties, called Jornadas de la Danza Mary Wigman. For the local modern dance scene, Mary Wigman (as representative of the *Ausdruckstanz* tradition) figured as an iconic banner under which they could present their own work.

However, to state that modern dance in Quito is a mere copy or direct translation of *Ausdruckstanz* would not recognize the complexity of several cross-continental connections nor the internal dynamics of that artistic movement. First, *Ausdruckstanz* could only influence Ecuadorian artistic practices indirectly. Klever and Wilson, for instance, knew about Wigman by seeing the video of *Hexentanz II*, as well as photos, and by reading some of her writings, but there was no personal contact with someone that could have transmitted this tradition to them. Second, Ecuadorian artists were equally familiar with modern dance as it was developed in the United States. Klever and Wilson knew as much of Martha Graham, José Limón, and Katharine Dunham as they did about Wigman or, later, Pina Bausch. Third, an important point of reference for Klever and Wilson's work is the sojourn in Quito of Pascal Monod, a disciple of Jerzy Grotowski whose influence arguably can be felt up to this day. Fourth, despite the lines of influence that can be drawn, Klever and Wilson's own creative input shaped the development of a dance practice that stood in close relation to its cultural context. Thus, it might be more suitable to talk about their works as incorporating the spirit of modernism rather than displaying clear German expressionistic features.

But even with these several qualifications, I would argue that Ecuadorian dance practice has a stronger affinity with German *Ausdruckstanz* than with modern dance in the United States, as several common characteristics can be pointed out: the non-consolidation of a formal dance vocabulary; the idea that each dancer has to find a personal way of expressing her/his inner self; and the possibility that individual dancers can become autonomous creators rather than company members copying the skills of the master.

If this premise holds, my former education in Ecuador can possibly function as another valid source of information in my reconstruction of the Wigman solos. Thus, we would observe a bi-directional influence: *Ausdruckstanz* influencing the formation of modern dance in Quito, and modern dance in Quito influencing the reenactment of *Ausdruckstanz*. How? Precisely because having studied modern dance in

Quito, I think I have been able to assimilate a corporeality that is not radically different than the one enacted by expressionist dancers in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the work of Klever and Wilson as well as in Wigman's work, the performer is asked to have his or her body under full control. No gesture should be executed if it is not consciously produced. Despite a demand for technical precision, the performers are not meant to move mechanically (this would be dismissed as mere gymnastics). Instead, the dancer is expected to recapture the lived experience of the dance each time it is performed. Ideally, the dancers should reach a heightened or ecstatic state of being, transcending the mere physicality of the gestures and expressing the inner self of the human being. The dialectical interplay between rigid technical control and transcendent expression is a structuring principle of both dance traditions.

The gaze also functions similarly in both traditions: it should be "intense" and almost always directed toward a well-defined but empty point in space. The straight and sustained gaze helps to make present the transcendental: it suggests that there is more to discover beyond the visual boundaries of a given space. The staring dancer leads us into a "present absence," into an invisibility that can be seen. This use of the gaze can be observed in many pictures of Wigman, perhaps especially in those of a "demonic" character. But the expressive use of the gaze can also take on soft, internalized connotations: *Anruf* and *Pastorale* are, for example, almost entirely danced with the eyes half-closed. In Klever and Susanne's classes I have practiced this use of the gaze by looking to a point straight in front of me, taking care not to deviate my gaze elsewhere while the exercise is being executed.

The use of breathing also plays an important role in creating a specific movement quality. Control of the breath modifies muscular tone and affects the perception a dancer has of his or her own body. Attaching movement to specific breaths can produce a holistic perception of movement and body, thus enhancing the ecstatic, heightened state a dancer is expected to achieve within these traditions.

Modern dance in Quito did not so much copy foreign sources as channel the local subjective experience of individuals living in that city.<sup>5</sup> This, however, does not mean that modern dance in Ecuador was essentially insular. Points of reference were indeed sought abroad, but rather than being an alien importation, they responded to very specific needs. How might one account for the process of acclimation that made possible the use of similar aesthetic means in different places? That is to say, how might one understand the similarities observed in the development of modern dance in Germany, the United States, and Ecuador?

A possible answer might be sought in the way industrialization, the alienation of modern labor, and the development of metropolitan cities have spread throughout the world. But then, taking into account this process of modernization and globalization, as well as the assumption that artistic practices are always

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Photo 4. Fabian Barba in A Mary Wigman Dance Evening (2008). (Photo: Franziska Aigner).





constructed in conversation rather than in isolation, the following question appears: With whom did modern dance in Quito converse, why, and under what circumstances?

In 1999 the Frente de Danza Independiente (an artistic collective founded by Klever Viera and Wilson Pico, among others) presented a photo exhibition of German dance-theater. This exhibition was made possible thanks to the support of the Goethe Institute and the Humboldt Association, and it featured photos of Pina Bausch, Gerhard Bohner, Reinhild Hoffmann, Johann Kresnik, and Susanne Linke. In the program notes, these choreographers are designated as the “direct heirs of the Dance of Expression.”

This exhibition provides us with two possible approaches to the question. First, we can see that in 1999 a specific historical tradition was considered relevant to contemporary dance. This is put in perspective when we consider that other dance traditions existing at that time (for example, the dance scene in New York after the Judson Church period or the dance developments that had taken place in Belgium since the 1980s) were hardly noticed in Quito. Thus, given a certain selectivity and a lack of access to wider sources of information, dance practitioners in Quito took selectively from the European dance scene. Second, in the text accompanying the exhibition, there are complaints that the Ecuadorian dance scene has been relegated to a secondary source of information. Ecuadorian dancers deplored the lack of direct contact with the references they had chosen and believed that the conversation with other dance traditions had turned into a monologue.

At the root of these questions lies the need to think about the ways in which different dance networks are being constructed around the globe. We are urged to reconsider the relationship between dominant (historical) discourses and centralized places of power. This inquiry is not only relevant to understanding the history of modern dance in Quito but is also relevant to understanding contemporary dance creations in a globalized world.

## Notes

This article is the conflation and recapitulation of two texts I had previously written. I want to thank Mark Franko's generous help on this task as well as his insightful comments and questions that led to the redaction of the text as it presently appears.

1. Valuable information can also be derived from photos that do not directly refer to the solos I am working with. Observed patterns in the alignment of the spine, pelvis, and head can provide tools to describe a certain lexicon. One can make a vast nomenclature of dance postures just by describing the different ways of combining the position of the pelvis in relation to the chest, for example (pelvis forward—chest forward; pelvis forward—chest backward; pelvis forward—chest sideways, etc.). Such a lexicon of dance postures registers certain leitmotifs and tendencies that can later be used to fill gaps in the reconstructed movement scores.

2. Among the contemporary dance scholars whose work I've consulted, I could mention Susan Manning, Ramsay Burt, Mark Franko, Hedwig Müller, Yvonne Hardt, and Peter Gay, among others. It's also been very valuable to read texts by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and John Martin as a means to get a taste of the cultural climate of the time.

3. There is a further mine of written sources, vast in size and range: the press reviews, interviews, and hand programs published at the time the solos were performed. Analyzing this material, one finds contemporary information that can contribute to the reconstruction of a choreography's score, pointing out the duration of a solo, or the instruments for the musical accompaniment. But one can also find very disparate information that somehow helps to recreate the whole context in which the solos were presented: personal and subjective readings of what a solo meant for someone, descriptions of the behavior of the crowd in the theater, a very casual narration of how Mary Wigman felt before and after a performance, etc.

4. For my discussion of modern dance in Quito, I will draw mainly upon the work of Klever Viera and Wilson Pico, two of the dance pioneers in this city. This particular focus enables me to make a clear exposition/argument. However, it is necessary to point out that the dance movement in Ecuador encompasses more than their work, even if in a panoramic view we can find largely the same elements at work.

5. This argument was first suggested to me through Ramsay Burt's understanding of modernism as related to the subjective experience of an individual living in a modern city (Burt 1998).

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