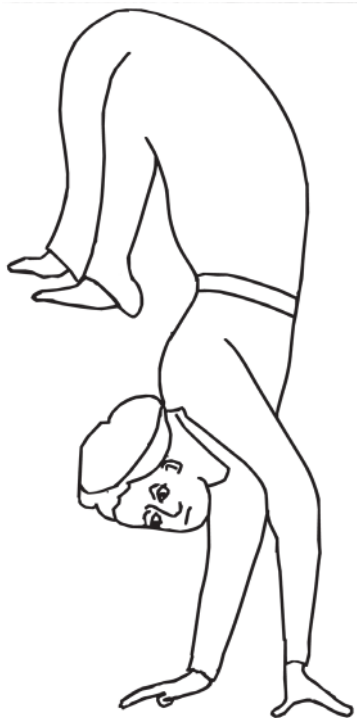


MOVING BODIES



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Five Vignettes

- On February 26, 1645, at the start of the negotiations that ended the Thirty Years' War, a ballet, *Ballet de la paix*, was staged and performed in Münster, in the German province of Westphalia. The person responsible for the work, François Ogier, was a theologian and a man of letters, but also a member of the French delegation at the peace conference. During the years he spent in Münster he said mass on Sundays, delivered sermons, and heard confessions, but he also devoted time to ballet performances. Indeed, he not only wrote, choreographed, and directed the *Ballet de la paix*, but also participated in it as one of the leading dancers. The other performers were all members of the French diplomatic delegation suitably dressed up as soldiers, peasants, and various allegorical characters. After the opening night, the ballet was performed twice the following day, and a fourth time at the city hall two days later, with local dignitaries and the wealthier residents of the town in attendance.
- On October 18, 1752, an *opéra-ballet*, *Devin du village*, was performed in the royal palace at Fontainebleau in the presence of Louis XV and members of his court. The composer and librettist was none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher. The evening, by all accounts, was a great success. All the glamorous women in the audience were moved by the piece, Rousseau reported in his *Confessions*, and the next day the king could be heard bellowing out one of its main themes as he puttered around in his palace. Rousseau was the darling of fashionable Parisian society. And yet already the following year he found himself on the minority side in one of the great culture wars of the day – the *Querelle de bouffons*, the “Quarrel of the Comic Actors.” There can be no such thing as French music, Rousseau insisted, since the French language, when set to music, is utterly unable to express emotions. French music is too rational, and not sufficiently moving.
- On December 1, 1498, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama and his four ships made landfall in the vicinity of today's South African city of Port Elizabeth. Spotting some natives on the shore, and eager to replenish their supplies, the Europeans launched their dinghies. When they approached land, they threw some small bells in the direction of the natives, who eventually came close enough to take the presents directly from their hands. In return, the Europeans were

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given bracelets made from ivory. The following day the exchange continued when 200 natives appeared, bringing oxen and sheep. Four or five of the natives began playing flutes, and they danced in the native fashion. Yet it did not take long for Vasco da Gama and his crew to respond in kind. “The captain-major then ordered the trumpets to be sounded, and we, in the boats, danced, and the captain-major did so likewise when he rejoined us.” When the dancing stopped, the Europeans returned to their ships with a black ox, which they had bought for the price of three bracelets.

- On October 18, 1814, a high-school teacher, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, and a group of his students assembled at Hasenheide, a wooded area on the southern outskirts of Berlin. Hasenheide was where they carried out their physical exercises. Jahn and his students wrestled, jumped across ditches, ran in labyrinths, balanced on beams, and swung from parallel bars and trees. However, they were not only gymnasts, but also liberals and nationalists, and on this particular occasion they were celebrating the victory over Napoleon at the battle of Leipzig the previous year. In the evening, they lit bonfires, sang songs, and gave speeches. Many ordinary Berliners had turned up to watch and participate in the celebrations, and groups of students from neighboring towns had joined in as well. Although the French had been defeated, Jahn reminded everyone present, Germany was still divided into far too many separate political units.
- On June 13, 1911, the Ballets Russes presented the first of its celebrated productions, *Petrushka*, to the Parisian public. The ballet was put together by an all-Russian team, with music by Igor Stravinsky and with Vaslav Nijinsky dancing in the title role. The ballet told the story of *Petrushka*, a doll that became a mannequin and then an automaton. First it did not move at all; then it moved because the puppet-master moved it; and finally it moved on its own, but in a distinctly robotic fashion. What is the difference between puppets and human beings? the ballet asked. And what needs to be added to an automaton for it to become a human being? These questions were timely since many people at the time – city-dwellers and workers in the new factories in particular – felt increasingly constrained in their movements, and manipulated by the many demands of modern life.

These five vignettes are taken from different historical periods and contexts, but they all have the body and its movements as a common

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theme. They tell stories of theologians, diplomats, and sea captains who danced, of nationalists who did gymnastic exercises, and of dolls that tried to move like human beings. Moving bodies are not usually discussed by historians. Or rather, they are discussed only by historians with specializations – by dance historians, for example, or historians of sports. Dance and gymnastics, mainstream historians are convinced, have nothing to do with the kinds of things they write about – military or political affairs, diplomacy, economic or social transformations. There is absolutely no reason why these physical pursuits, interesting though they are in themselves, should feature in these accounts. The books that mainstream historians write focus on the deliberations of rational minds, on how the world is interpreted, and moving bodies can safely be left to others. But if this is our conclusion, we will misunderstand not only bodies and their movements, but also the past itself. After all, bodies are not something that we have, but something that we are, and movement is something that we constantly engage in. Movements place us in the world in a certain fashion, and make our experiences into experiences of a certain kind. And how we experience the world, in turn, determines how we feel, about ourselves and about everything that happens to us. It follows that bodies and their movements should be a primary concern of historians of all kinds. Bodies and their movements will influence questions of diplomacy and war, and even economic and social transformations.

If nothing else, the importance of the topic should be obvious from the fact that the people concerned spent such an inordinate amount of time, and considerable resources, engaged in these activities. In early modern Europe, diplomats at peace conferences danced, but so did kings and queens, leading statesmen and stateswomen, their lovers, legitimate and illegitimate children, courtiers, and advisers. High government officials danced too, and so did lawyers, cardinals, and bishops. Likewise, Vasco da Gama was not the only dancing sea captain. All Spanish conquistadors, including Christopher Columbus, danced with the natives, and so did the first Englishmen – the “First Fleeters” – who arrived in Australia in 1788. Even Charles Darwin danced with the people he encountered in Tierra del Fuego in December 1832. And as far as nationalists are concerned, the gymnastics association that Jahn started was soon copied all over Germany, and their members played an important role in the nationalist uprisings of 1848. In addition to fighting for their cause, they continued their

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wrestling and ditch-jumping. German nationalists went on nature hikes too. In the years before the Nazi takeover in 1933, there were nationalist hiking associations that included tens of thousands of members. Some nature hikes even took place in the nude, and so did some of the gymnastics exercises.

This is all quite strange. We are not used to statesmen and diplomats who dance. Or rather, while they certainly may do so in their own free time, we are not used to them donning leotards and dancing in an official capacity. Similarly, while the conquistadors of our imagination raped and pillaged the natives, they never danced with them, and as for German nationalists, we can certainly see them marching, in goose-step, in rows upon rows, but we never see them swinging from trees, and certainly not naked. Truth be told, these rather exuberantly executed movements cast a slightly ridiculous light on the past, and on the people we study. Even just mentioning what they were up to, we seem to make fun of them. For some reason, dancing diplomats and beam-balancing nationalists embarrass us. So it is easy to understand why mainstream historians prefer not to talk about them. What we ignore we do not have to explain, and as a result history will be so much easier to write. If we turn the past into a copy of our present, we will always understand the people we find there, and we will come across nothing that embarrasses us.

This, however, would be a mistake. If we rearrange the past to suit our present concerns, it will no longer challenge us. And being challenged by the past is one of the reasons we write history in the first place. For the strangeness of these movements is indeed challenging. They leave us puzzled, and our puzzlement indicates that a change of some kind has taken place. Today we think differently about our bodies and about our selves, and as a result we can no longer quite understand what the people of the past were up to. The moving bodies are left on the other bank of a river that our comprehension cannot seem to cross. But then again, it could also be that we have not tried hard enough. This, at least, is the possibility we will explore in this book. The alternative, in other words, is to accept the strangeness, get over our embarrassment, and accept the challenge. Instead of ignoring the moving bodies, we should make them the focus of our study. Only in this way can we hope to obtain a more complete account of these historical events, but also, just possibly, a new perspective on ourselves. The aim is to investigate not only why and how people moved in the

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past, but also our own preconceptions. This book is that investigation and that self-examination.

Cultural Explanations

Before we can get to that point, however, we need a method for how to proceed. We know what we want to explain – moving bodies – but we still have to figure out how to do it. The most obvious thing to say, perhaps, is that our puzzlement is a result of “cultural differences.” Societies differ from each other after all, and each society has a certain culture. We are not like them, they are not like us, and it is consequently not surprising that we move in different ways, and with different purposes in mind. This is true across time as well. People moved in a certain way in the past that was specific to the society in which they lived. It follows that if we want to explain why diplomats danced and nationalists ran in labyrinths, it is these cultural differences that we should study.

The way to do this, a cultural anthropologist would argue, is to focus on a society’s “collectively sustained symbolic structures.” It is by means of symbols organized into structures of meaning that societies allow their inhabitants to make sense of their world. “[M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” as the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz puts it. “I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”¹ Society is a text we can read and interpret. Thus, when something happens to us, we consult the cultural resources of our society much as we might look something up in a dictionary. The dictionary tells us what something is and what it means. And there is in principle no reason why historians could not proceed in the same fashion. While we all have our personal reasons for doing what we do, meanings are not private but public, and although there may be methodological difficulties involved in fully grasping them, there are no philosophical problems involved. If we get our hands on the same dictionary that people used in the society we study, we can look up the same words, and understand what things meant. The task is to reconstruct “the implicit text behind every contingency, the symbolic gesture that frames every action, and the aesthetic envelope that expresses and shapes feeling, belief, and moral conviction.”²

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Alternatively, a historian might follow suggestions provided by poststructuralist thinkers. This is particularly apposite since writers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler often have made references to bodies in their work. Bodies are not natural entities or physiological facts, they explain, but social constructions. Butler's emphasizes the role of discourse. It is by constantly performing the kinds of rituals that a certain established discourse requires that the ostensibly natural comes into being. When we experience the world, we do so as a "woman," a "worker," a "person of color," and so on. This is also how notions of sexual normativity and deviance are established and maintained. Michel Foucault, for a part of his career, invoked the role of *épistèmes*, understood as shared structures of cognitive predispositions. "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *épistème* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice."³ Knowledge is closely related to power, Foucault explains, and one of the objects on which power is exercised are our bodies. Epistemic power is structural power, and once we come to internalize those structures, we start policing, and disciplining, ourselves. The task for historians is to document such effects.⁴

This is consequently the logic of a cultural explanation. A symbol, such as a word, has no meaning in and of itself, but it represents, stands for, a conception of something. Using the word, or hearing it, we conceive of an object in terms of its denotation – what it refers to – and its connotation – the associations it evokes. Once it becomes a part of a structure of other symbols that all refer to each other, words can be combined in any order that grammar allows. This, in the end, is how we construct our conceptual worlds, or reconstruct the conceptual worlds of others. In case of the people in the five vignettes briefly introduced above, we would consequently explain their movements not as a result of the motives that guided the individuals concerned, or in terms of biographical facts, but rather by means of the meanings that people in that time and place attached to those kinds of movements. A certain person moved a certain way because it made sense in their society. Perhaps, we could surmise, it reflected a mindset common before the Reformation, perhaps it was an expression of the norms of court society, an effect of colonialism, patriarchy, or the revival of Neostoicism in the seventeenth century. There are obviously many other possibilities.⁵

Against Interpretation

But notice what is happening here. The cultural theorists are no longer really talking about bodies and movements, and instead they discuss all kinds of other things. Focusing on symbolic structures, on discourses and *épistèmes*, actual bodies and their movements quickly recede from view. And this is what always happens in the case of cultural explanations. By virtue of its representation in language, the explanation comes to point away from the object of study and toward that which allows us to interpret it. The interpretation stands between us and the world, and between us and our bodies. Interpretations always proceed by interpreting something in terms of something else. Compare how cultural theorists deal with experiences. An experience is not just something that we feel, and live through, they insist, but instead whatever we can give an account of. It is only as interpreted that an experience comes to exist. “[H]uman experience,” as Geertz puts it, “is not mere sentience, but, from the most immediate perception to the most mediated judgment, significant sentience – sentience interpreted, sentience grasped.”⁶ It follows that those who cannot interpret what is happening to them can have no experiences. This includes newborns and animals, as Geertz explains, and perhaps also people with severe disabilities. “Undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experiences virtually shapeless.”⁷

The only problem – or rather, our saving grace – is that society is not a text. Life as we live it cannot be rendered in symbolic form. Not everything can be verbalized, be interpreted, speak or be spoken on behalf of. On the contrary, life as we go through it has an immediate, felt quality that always is far richer than whatever can be labeled, categorized, and represented in symbolic form. The way our bodies interact with their environment is prior to, and more basic than, any linguistic expression. In fact, the relationship works the other way around: It is not our interpretations that give us access to the world, but our access to the world that gives rise to our interpretations. This is obvious in the case of newborn children who have no language in which to interpret what is happening to them, but who nevertheless live in an eminently meaningful world. The dictionaries of the cultural theorists are missing a lot of entries, as it were, but often enough we have no idea

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what entries we are looking for. And what we cannot look up, historians cannot look up either. Cultural historians can never reconstruct a lived experience since lived experiences happen off the books.⁸

There is something of an intellectualist fallacy at work here. People who spend most of their time reading assume that everyone else is doing the same. Thus, cultural anthropologists claim to be interpreting a world that already has been preinterpreted for them by the people they study. And poststructuralist scholars insist that we all are trapped in semiotic structures from which there is no escape. Moreover, the intellectualist fallacy is often accompanied by a considerable degree of conceit. Society is a puzzle that must be solved, cultural theorist insist, and since they believe themselves to have found the key that unlocks all meaning, they consider themselves superior to the rest of us. But chances are there is no puzzle, there is no key, and that those who insist on constantly interpreting things miss, and misunderstand, life as we actually live it. Plato was adamant on this point, of course, but we should consider the possibility that those who claim to know more about life actually know less. Unexamined lives are vastly underrated.⁹

Consider an example. In one of his early articles, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Clifford Geertz makes a famous distinction between blinks and winks. While the physical movements involved are identical in the two cases, he explains, they denote entirely different things. A wink is deliberate and directed to a particular someone; it is a symbol that imparts a message, rendered in a socially established code, and as such it needs to be interpreted before it can be understood. While a naive observer, or perhaps a film camera, will see a blink, a trained cultural anthropologist will see a wink. Since not that much can be said about blinks, the stories told about them are thin, Geertz insists, but since there is no end to the kind of things that can be said about winks, our accounts result in thick descriptions, that is, descriptions that contain all those layers of significance afforded by a culture. This is consequently what cultural anthropologists should study. Geertz and the historians who follow him practice the art of hermeneutics, and they have no time for human physiognomy.¹⁰

But blinks are far more interesting than cultural theorists allow. Blinks are not some passive material substratum that becomes significant only once it is turned into a symbol. Blinks have a life of their own, as it were, but in order to study that life we need intellectual tools of an

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entirely different kind. We need the tools of cognitive science. Indeed, once we start conducting psychological tests, and read the printouts from fMRI scanners, we will discover any number of fascinating facts. For example, blink rates in humans, it turns out, are strongly associated with mental activity. When we are thinking, solving equations, or just daydreaming, we are not blinking, or not blinking that much. It is as though we need to fix our gaze on some external object. Instead, blinking predominantly happens at the end of a thought, once a daydream is over, or when we have finished a sentence. But we also blink a lot more when we are under pressure, humiliated, or put in embarrassing situations. If sufficiently pressurized, the blink will turn into a twitch or a facial tic.¹¹

Does this matter to historians? Of course it does. Blinks and twitches tell us a lot about how people feel and how they experience the situations in which they find themselves. Winston Smith, the main protagonist of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, knew this only too well. "Your worst enemy, he reflected, was your own nervous system. At any moment the tension inside you was liable to translate into some visible symptom."¹² Winston thought of a man he had passed in the street a few weeks earlier, a quite ordinary-looking man, a Party member, carrying a briefcase. But just as they passed each other the man twitched. It was only a rapid quiver, obviously habitual, and most likely not even conscious. But Winston knew that twitches of this kind were exactly what the Thought Police were looking for. They were not symbols, but signs, signs of a body subject to intense pressure. The Thought Police, we can conclude, had the opposite interests of those of cultural theorists: They cared little for hermeneutics and much for human physiognomy. "That poor devil is done for," Winston thought to himself.¹³

This snapshot of life in Oceania is not an analysis. In Orwell's short paragraph we are given next to no information about Oceanian society, and there is no discussion of its webs of meaning and semiotic structures. And yet, thanks to Orwell's skill as a writer, we know a lot about what it feels like to live under this kind of a regime. In fact, we know all we need to know about Big Brother. And we know not because we have compiled a thick description. Our description is actually exceedingly thin, and it is based on nothing but the realization that the stranger Winston passed in the street was a human being with a human body, that Winston himself is a human with a human body, that