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## Gestures of grieving and mourning : a transhistoric dance-scheme.

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### **Abstract**

*This short analysis refers to cultural anthropology and aesthetics of dance, and intends to present a few remarkable steps in the long history of a special kind of danced gestures : expressions of feelings and representations of activities related to grieving and mourning, like lifting up hands in the air or upon one's head and dramatically waving long hair. The focus is set on some universals and similarities as well as on contextualized variations and differences, in a series of six examples : ancient Greek iconography of danced mourning rituals and tragic griefs ; expressionist death ceremonies, like in Mary Wigman's Totenmal ; the post-expressionist / neo-baroque synthesis in Pina Bausch's works ; and the popular re-enactment and re-interpretation of grieving expressions and gestures in some voguing rituals and heavy-metal rock scenographies. The history of precise gestures and actions may be a useful instrument for the study of dance traditions, renewals, and innovations.*

### **Historical and cultural anthropology dialoguing with aesthetics and phenomenology of dance**

The focus of this analysis will be set on some universals and similarities as well as on contextualized variations and differences. The first part is more epistemological and abstract (a brief attempt to synthesize some questions about the history of dance-gestures) and the second more concrete (a short walk through a series of significative images and pictures of danced gestures) : from ancient Greek iconography of danced mourning rituals and tragic griefs to “popular” re-enactments and re-interpretations of grieving expressions and gestures in some voguing rituals and heavy-metal rock scenographies, via expressionist representations of death ceremonies, like in Mary Wigman's *Totenmal* and Martha Graham's *Lamentation*, and the post-expressionist / neo-baroque synthesis in Pina Bausch's *Orpheus und Eurydike* and *Café Müller*. Along this demonstration, I make the hypothesis that the history of precise gestures and actions may be a useful instrument for the study of dance traditions, renewals, and innovations, as well as of the cultural history of the body in movement and action (Briand : 2013). This way of historicizing the dancing body refers also to “embodied cognition” and cognitive poetics (Johnson : 2007).

By referring to cultural anthropology and aesthetics of dance, I intend to identify and compare a few steps in the long history of a special kind of danced gestures, used as a specific example : expressions of feelings and representations of activities related to grieving and mourning, like lifting up hands in the air, alone or in choral groups, while sitting or standing, or upon one's head, and dramatically waving or banging one's head, especially with long hair. My general purpose is the study of the distinction and relation

of anthropological universals and historical varieties, performed and represented, with a special focus on Greek antiquity and the way this reference evolves, consciously or not, in some moments of modern and contemporary dances (Suquet : 2012).

### **Methodological references : from Marcel Mauss and Aby Warburg to the “figures of danced gesture”**

In this kind of analyses, dance history scholars follow a long tradition of anthropologists and historians of art, whose prominent and significative figures could be Marcel Mauss (and his “corporeal techniques”, Mauss : 1936 and Grau : 2005) and Aby Warburg (and his historical / aesthetical collections of “images in motion”, Warburg : 2000). For the first (Mauss), gestures, in every culture, are the primary constituents of a code which might be viewed, at least metaphorically, as a linguistic and cultural system : dance, as a bodily technique, has something to do with medicine, political and religious rituals, collective and individual celebrations, and the construction of ethical and aesthetical norms and values as performed by what is supposed to be a good, beautiful or efficient body, with considerable variations from a culture to another, and crucial determinations based upon age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.

For the second (Warburg), the perspective is mostly aesthetical (Didi-Huberman : 2002, Michaud : 2004). His trans-historical method is based upon typologized and synthetical collections of images, put together in visual groups which organize the cultural memory (*mnemosyne* in ancient Greek) of what is traditionally called art. Dance gestures, then, are a fundamental component of the history of perception and subjectivity, *pathos* and *ethos*, and, eventually, arts (both performing and plastic, and space and time arts ...) and constitutively human culture(s).

Following this double reference to Mauss and Warburg, this association of synchronic anthropology and diachronic iconology refers to some principles of a transdisciplinary approach, rich with ever new perspectives. The method is altogether experimental, dialectical, and political. As it will be shown with some boards in Warburg’s Atlas, this comparative method joins different experimental devices, like a moderated use of anachronism as well as a transhistorical and transcultural comparative trend. It also stages and questions the dialectics of contextualization and un- or de-contextualization of dancing or danced gestures and their semantical, pragmatival, ethical, or ethical features. And these experimental dialectics have strong political undertones, since these dance gestures, as they are no bare movements but parts of both spectacular and ritual performances, have much to do with identification and active subjectivation.

The polyphonic study directed by Marie Glon and Isabelle Launay (Gilon & Launay : 2012) easily exemplifies this perspective : dance studies, historical, aesthetical and political, have much to benefit from specific monographies about gestures in different cultures and choreographic works, like, as the list which organizes their last publication about the « history of gestures » : standing, falling, walking, running, jumping, sitting down, turning around, coming and going, taking by the hand, carrying, hitting, watching, etc<sup>1</sup>. And the influence of Warburgian iconology, cross-fertilized with cultural anthropology, is here obvious and hopefully practical for instance in two collection-pictures from Warburg’s *Mnemosyne-Atlas* (« memory-album », Warburg : 2000, and Didi-Huberman : 2011). The titles of the images collected here are clearly

related to the kind of gestural (mythical and ritual) modalities of grieving and mourning I would like to focus on here. As Warburg puts it, the figure 1 (Mnemosyne picture # 5) is about : *Magna Mater, Cybele, Dispossessed mother (Niobe, flight and fright), Destructive mother, Furious (offended) woman (Maenad, Orpheus, Pentheus), Lamentation over the daed (son!). Transition : representation of the underworld (the rape of Proserpina). Head between hands (Maenad, Cassandra, priestess).* And the figure 2 (Mnemosyne picture # 42) is about : *Energetic inversion of pain-pathos (Pentheus, Maenad near the cross). Bourgeois funereal lamentation, heroized. Religious funereal lamentation. Death of the Redeemer. Entombment. Funereal meditation.*



Figure 1: A. Warburg, Mnemosyne picture # 5



Figure 2 : Mnemosyne picture # 42

And by imitating this way to represent the history of gestures in visual and performing arts, it might be possible to build up a new “Mnemosyne picture” including ancient images with more modern or contemporary ones : one example of this intuitional method could be the figure n° 3, with, on the left and upper side, ancient Greek examples, on the right and down side, pictures from Pina Bausch’s dances, and, in the middle, Mary Wigman death-ritual, voguing and, in the centre of the whole picture, a metal-rock headbanging sample. I shall try now to go beyond this first tabular effect and observe each of these images linearly.





Figure 3: (Post-) Modern “Mnemosyne Picture” about Grieving and Mourning.

**Ancient Greek iconography of danced mourning rituals and tragic griefs**

About grieving and mourning gestures, the first examples come from Greek antiquity, just like in Warburgian boards. And first with ritual representations :

- in figure 4, one of a *prothesis* (exposition of a celebrated dead corpse), on a geometric style funeral crater : on the sides of the bed, the performers of the rite are represented as integrated in a cultural frame (here the agents of the spectacle are members of the community, and there is no radical difference between amateurs and professionals), and, amplified by the system of choral or processionnal series, the typical gestures like putting hands on the foreheads or the heads, while sitting or standing near the funeral centre of the rite, as a lamentation, celebration, and prayer adressed to the ritual community, which the dance constitutes as a pragmatic whole, and to the gods. The imagination and memory of the watchers of this vase scene (for example in a *symposion* or ‘banquet’, since this a *crater* or “wine mingler”) activates then, on a synaesthetical mode, other senses like

kinaesthesia, audition (songs, instrumental music, ritual poetry ...), or even smelling (incense, the flavor of sacrifices or the smoke of the coming funeral *pyre*).



Figure 4: Scene of *prothesis* (corpse-exposition).  
Geometric attic crater, ca. 760-750 b.c.  
(Musée du Louvre, Paris)



Figure 5 : (Prototragic) chorus,  
dancing at a tomb, Athenian  
red-figure column crater, ca. 480  
(Basel, Antikenmuseum)

- in figure 5, one of a tragic chorus, performed by (young military) *ephebs*, as a decisive link between ritual and spectacle, with the typical uplifting of hands, in celebration of the gods (here Dionysos) and dead heroes of the tragedy<sup>ii</sup>.  
- and, most important for the modern history of dance and dance philosophy, three glimpses of so-called dionysiac rituals (although the nietzschean dichotomy between apollinian and dionysiac, famously anachronic, is not well accepted by the historians of ancient Greek practices and representations, but crucial for performers and composers like Nijinsky or Isadora Duncan). The first (figure 6), from a funeral oil vase, represents Dionysos dancing with two Maenads, literally “crazy-ones”, expressively bending their heads, waving their long hairs forward, and shaking their arms and legs in different directions, like in extatic trance. The second one (figure 7) is an archaic bronzo of a dancing Maenad in her specific side-walk, arms uplifting, and face looking backward. And the last one (figure 8) is a marble sculpture of another Maenad, with the typical torsion and twisting of the whole body and the falling back of the head (the so-called dionysiac neck-breaking). These representations are strongly enthusiastic and might as well feel joyful as grieving, but these gestures compose a general body grammar with obvious kathartic and vivid qualities. And expressions of grieving and mourning might be as ambiguous and dynamic as the complicated relations of vigorous laughter with passionate tears : this has to do with a firstly musical, asymmetrical and disruptive conception of dance.





Figure 6: Dionysos and two Maenads, Lecythos (funeral oil vase), Palermo, 4th c. b. c



Figure 7: Dancing Maenad, bronze, Skopje (Macedonia), 6th century b. c.



Figure 8 : Maenad, ca., 370-330 b.c., copy of a Greek original by Scopas, marble, Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.

### Expressionist representations of death ceremonies

The second series of examples associates ancient, medieval and modern references. The expressionistic turn of dance history, in the 1920's and 1930's, not only in Germany, is partly a reaction to classical formalism and romantic sublimation : it works on forces (like bodily energies or kinaesthetic empathy) more than on forms, but, at the same time, it takes its inspiration from gestural forms and images of ancient or distant (esp. non

European) cultures. Those pictured gestures, like on ancient Greek vases for Nijinsky's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, are traces of performances which expressionist choreographers intend to re-enact or re-create, both in order to integrate themselves in a long tradition and to de-construct the academic dances of their times.

This is typical for Mary Wigman (Manning : 2006, Nouveau : 2011), in the following collection of photographs (figure 9), and her uses of hair, arms and head movements, masks and costumes, solo and chorus structures, straight and twisted tensions, etc : *Götzendienst (Idolatry)*, 1919 ; *Hexentanz (Witch Dance)*, 1926 ; *Totentanz (Dance of Death)*, 1928 ; and especially *Totenmal (Monument to the dead)*, 1930, with the typically gendered female and male chorus, or *Schicksalslied (Song of Fate)*, 1935. The last picture, from *Totenmal*, shows a duet between the Demon and Mary Wigman herself, who exemplifies here many physical and psychological features of a Maenad.

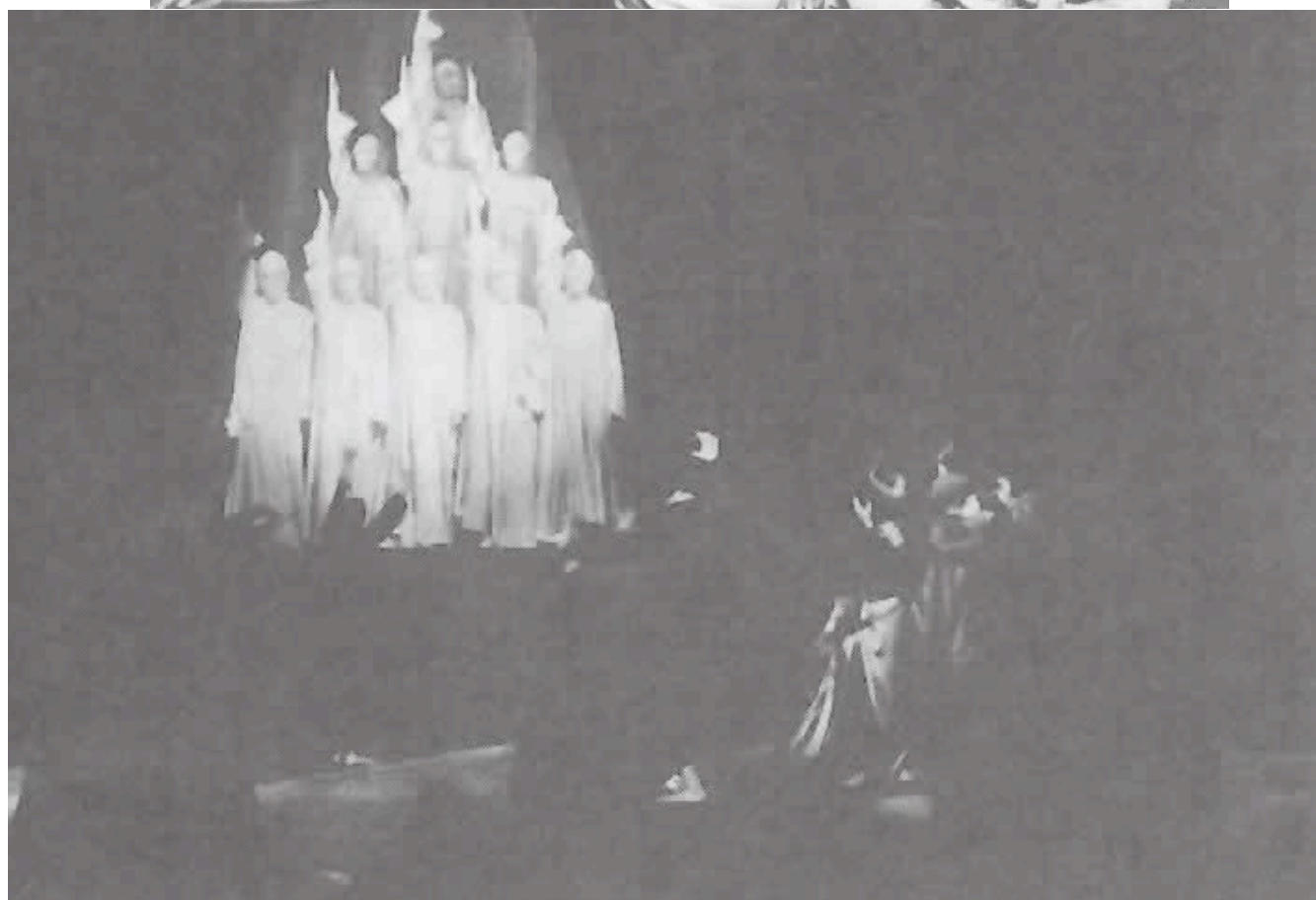


Figure 9 : Mary Wigman  
9a : *Götzendienst (Idolatry)*, 1919.



9b : *Hexentanz (Witch Dance)*, 1926.





9d : *Totenmal (Monument to the Dead)*, 1930. The female and male chorus.



Figure 9 : Mary Wigman and the Demon,  
*Totenmal*, 1930.

In a different cultural and political context, we might compare with Martha Graham's *Lamentation* (1930) and *Letter to the world* (1940), as a good example of the dialectics of tradition and innovation of both similar and transformed figures of grieving and mourning (figure 10).



Figure 10 : Martha Graham, *Lamentation*,  
1930 (left) and *Letter to the world*, 1940.

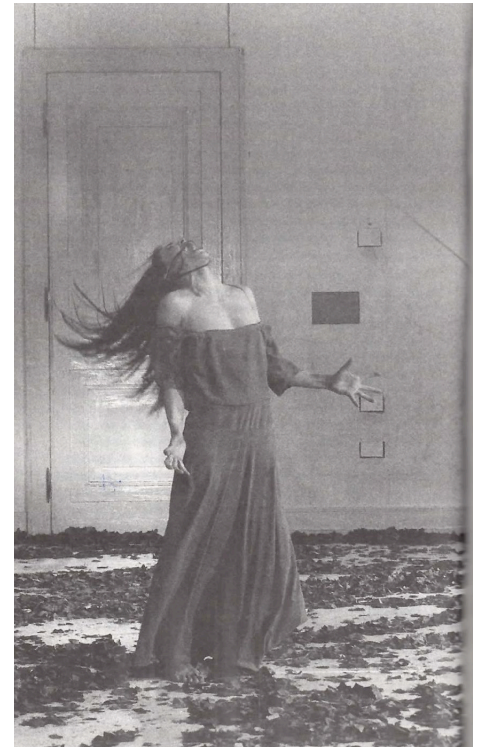
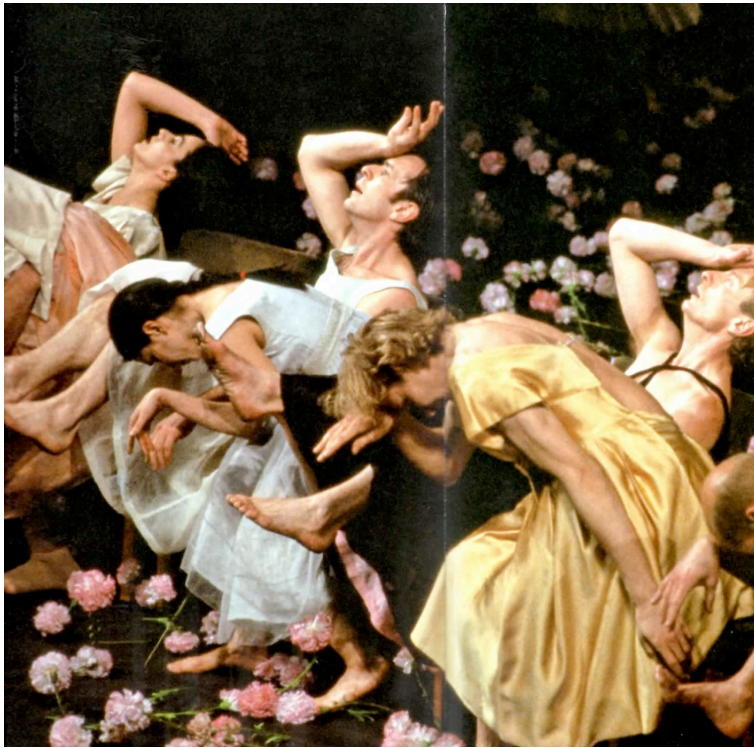
### A post-expressionist / neo-baroque synthesis

I also take Pina Bausch's choreographic pieces as another fine example of these moving relations of gestural universals with artistic and historical variations (figures 11). Pina Bausch both refers to post-expressionism and neo-baroque / neo-romanticism, but she is also aware of post-modernity and the originally hybrid genre of *Tanztheater* implies that, in these various dance-pieces, ritual and spectacle, narration and expression, as well as nostalgia and rebellion, are intricately cooperating and tensely dialoguing (Servos : 2001, Delahaye : 2008, Nouveau : 2011). Some examples of this situation, and other figures of neck-breaking, hair and arms-waving, torso-twisting, hands on the head, aso, as well as ethical and physical re-negotiations of memory, sorrow, anxiety or tension, might be some pictures from the following *opera* : *Orpheus und Eurydike* (1975), the first part of it (about the arrival of Orpheus in the realm of Death) is called *Trauer* (*Mourning*) ; *Nelken* (*Carnations*), 1982 ; *Café Müller*, 1978 ; *Für die Kinder von gestern, heute und morgen* (*For the children of yesterday, today and tomorrow*), 2002. In such a large work as Bausch's, these figures of grieving and mourning create a sophisticated web of intertextual relations, quite similar to what we noticed from ancient Greece to contemporary times : the German choreographer has produced a world in itself, structured by gestural universals and variations.



Figure 11a : Pina Bausch, *Orpheus und Eurydike*, 1975

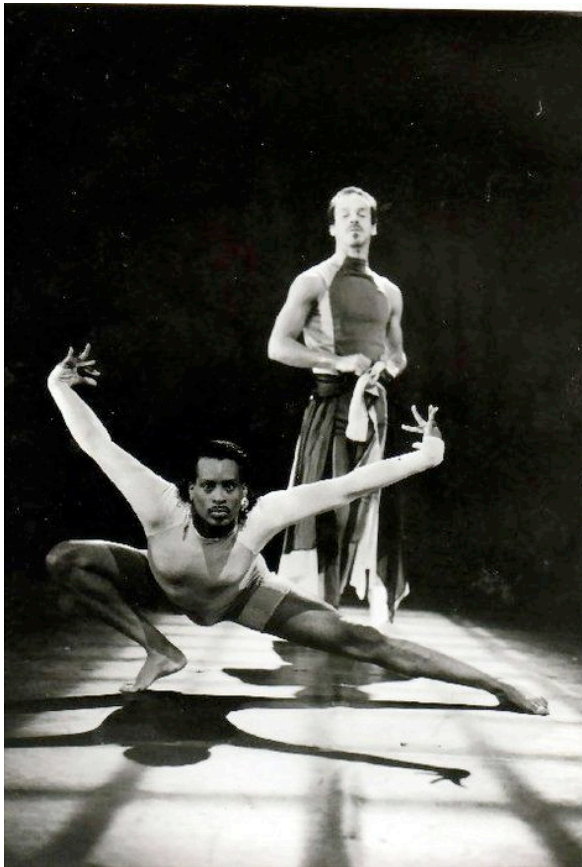




Figures 11b-e : Pina Bausch (from upper left to right)  
 11b : *Nelken (Carnations)*, 1982, 11c : *Blaubart (Bluebeard)*, 1977, 11d : *Café Müller*, 1978, 11e : *Für di Kinder von gestern, heute und morgen (For the children of yesterday, today and tomorrow)*, 2002

**Popular re-enactments and re-interpretations of grieving expressions and gestures.**

By very similar processes, the so-called popular cultures create ethical and aesthetical values (even sometimes norms) which refer at the same time to human universals and originally transgressive identities, and specific gestures embody these values. A fine example of this evolution might be voguing rituals (from presentation to performance and ‘vogue’, and from old way to new way and “vogue femmes”, figure 12). As examples follow a few pictures of Willi Ninja, who died at 45 (1961-2006), some from the 1990 documentary film “Paris is burning”. The photographic inspiration of these gestural systems make it at first apolinian (and visually formal), but the agonistic and energetic atmosphere of New-York ballrooms, as well as the both empowered and choral organisation of the “houses” (family-like collectives of LGBTQ afro-american and latino-american dancers and performers), make it more dionysiac. I hope at least some ancient, expressionistic or baroque undertones appear here, especially in the nervous tension of gestural combinations. However, the grieving or mourning theme might be not obvious in every picture, but it definitely appears in the performances, where the dancers not only dance, but vigorously and concretely, in their shows (more ritual actions than just spectacular) resist to oppressive norms and struggle for life and identity (Briand : 2012)<sup>iii</sup>.



Figures 12 : Voguing, Pictures of Willi Ninja (1961-2006)



The last part of this study is about heavy-metal rock scenographies, which one might compare to ancient Greek dionysiac rituals (esp. in tragedy), like in a conceptual and historical final loop. The main common point between these two extremely distant cultural activities is just that they both deal with a basic issue in human condition : the relation to terror and death and the necessarily mediated katharsis art and culture provide. I refer here, among other, to Tom Pyszczynski's "terror management theory", where self-esteem and cultural representations play a fundamental role (Pyszczynski *et al.* : 2003).

The best analogy, in a gestural perspective, could be drawn from a comparison of the so-called "headbanging" (figure 13), typical of long-haired metal-rock community members (performers and spectators), to the Maenad's crazy torsions and distortions. This activity, both ritual and spectacular, is precisely categorized in mostly formal terms, like the following ones. The real performances (by the members of this cultural community, spectators as well as musicians on the stage), however, are much more embodied and energetical than these designations could show, and their common point is a vivid system of ruptures in the rhythm, with alternative slowness and heaviness preparing explosive crises. The names of those gestural figures and styles are mostly descriptive : *up and down, circular swing, drunk style, half-circle, figure eight, side to side, whiplash, two up two down, all-out, tandem, thrust, hammer, breakdown, low-profile, full body, half body, we're-all-friends-here, windmill, swingshake, nod...*



Figure 13 : a moderate example of headbanging

Another type of action, also famous on the hardcore punk scene, is the moshing or circle pit, also called pogo or trashing, popularized by Nirvana's "Smells like teen spirit", and this kathartic gestural activity also has sub-categories, with formal designations : floorpunch / pickin'up, circle-pit, two-step, wind-mill, side to side, kick moshing, gorilla stomp ...



As a last example about these notions of tradition, renewal and innovation in the long history of dance gestures, actions and activities, I eventually refer to a video of “In Mourning”, a progressive death metal band from Sweden (Falun), whose last albums, in their titles, refer to aesthetic, ethical, cosmic and “spiritual” issues : *Shrouded Divine* (2008), *Monolith* (2010), *The Weight of Oceans* (2012). The tune is called “A vow to conquer the ocean” and the video typically shows gestures which may refigure ancient / universal interrogations and activities, in an alternative contemporary culture<sup>iv</sup>.

And that is too what this presentation intended to do, being more altermodern than just postmodern, that is strongly relating archaic forms and forces and modern ones. The gestures of our times are not new, but constantly renewed.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> This post-maussian and warburgian method refers, AMONG OTHERS, to a research-seminar in Paris « Figures du geste dansé : mythes, identités, interprétations » (Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art). The study of Glon & Launay is about the following (french) verbs : *être debout, tomber, marcher, courir, sauter, s’asseoir, tourner, arriver / partir, prendre par la main, porter, frapper, regarder*.

<sup>ii</sup> I studied this figure in a previous participation to the Proceedings of a SDHS conference : " Interplays between Politics and Amateurism : Ritual and Spectacle in Ancient Greece and some Post-modern Experiments (Castellucci, Bagouet, Duboc, Halprin)" (SDHS 2010 Conference, *Dance and Spectacle*, 8-11 July, Univ. of Surrey, Guilford & The Place, London, UK), on line : <http://sdhs.scripts.mit.edu/proceedings/2010/#papers>, p. 33-48.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0En-tj0BhvY>. In Briand : 2012, I studied a specific trend in contemporary dance, which renews or “queers” itself by working / exploring voguing or other non-academic aesthetics, ethics, and politics. The tension of apolinian and dionysiac “esth-ethics” is crucial here.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EXD-uWAoN0> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdsIzmZSzmC>

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