Metagestures

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This introduction is a mediated gesture, *in medias res*, designed to help you, dear reader, become better acquainted with the writings that comprise this book; how they originated, and what they are attempting to achieve. I cannot see your facial expression while I am doing the introducing, so I do not have a sense of whether my gesture is capturing your attention. Perhaps it is boring you, or having some other effect that I did not even anticipate. (Perhaps you have already thrown the book out a window, starting a chain of events that will require further gestures from you in future, to avoid a law suit.) And because I cannot get a real-time “read” on the facility of my gesture, I have to put my faith in these ink-dried words to perform the magical alchemy described below. This gesture thus comes with a subtextual incantation: a spell encouraging a greater familiarity with the project, and thus — hopefully — a sympathetic orientation towards it.

All gestures hover somewhere between an action and an intention: not as fully realized or instrumental as the former, but nor as inchoate or tentative as the latter. Gestures are a kind of somatic language within which we inhabit. They thus create an
impersonal syntax, even as these are performed with our singularized, idiomatic bodies. This is the paradox: gestures are “public domain,” as it were, and part of our cultural inheritance; and yet they can also be highly individual or idiosyncratic. They can be required (the soldier’s salute) or unexpected (the lover’s seduction). As such, gestures inhabit the zone between agency and instinct, expression and reflex, freedom and automaticity.

The gesture of introducing—like most of the gestures described by Vilém Flusser in the book that inspired this project—is ubiquitous and, because of this, almost subliminal. We introduce things every day, or are introduced to them. And yet we are so focused on the subject or object being introduced that we miss the gesture that allowed it to happen. (Or, at most, we register it on an unconscious level.) The only time a quotidian gesture becomes conspicuous is when it is performed badly, or draws attention to itself for some theatrical or ironic reason. A good gesture, in the modern era, is one which happens so organically that it is barely noticed by those within its subtle, yet decisive, orbit. (Flusser describes it as “covered up by habit”; a case of “hyperfamiliarity.”) Such a gesture allows an action to occur, but the action itself comprises the prime interest.

Many have railed against the standardization of our gestures in modern times, and the subsequent alienation this is said to provoke. (Our smartphones, for instance, are teaching us to make specific and unprecedented gestures in order to communicate with them.) Flusser noted that there is no such thing as a free gesture, in our contemporary world. However, there is something like freedom expressed within it. It seems that gestures—like information—want to be free. Indeed, this subliminal aspect of gestural life may be one of the ways we measure the distance, and difference, between the modern age and that which came before. Modernity demands elliptical, automatic, and standardized gestures. We may even call them algorithmic, considering how pre-programmed they have become, following cultural scripts in a way designed to minimize acknowledgement of their rather arbitrary forms, ideological interests, and performative roots. Before the modern age (so the story goes,
at least), gestures existed more for their own sake. There was an elaborate dramaturgy (and comedy) of expressive manners and movements. The body was freer—at least in comparison to today—to make gestures untethered to limiting factors such as age, gender, class, or profit margin. (Though a medieval serf, obliged to toil in the fields all day may take umbrage at such a narrative.) Gestures were not an index of one’s calcified identity, but rather identity was presumed to emerge rather loosely from one gesture to the next. If these gestures contradicted themselves, they created less social dissonance, since personal coherence was not the foundation for public interactions. Rather one adopted different roles for each context, one threaded together with the other by the explicit self-referencing work of the gestures themselves. (Once again, a rather Romantic historical distinction, but one with at least a grain of truth to it.)

In any case, in premodern times, gestures were more easily recognized as such, and performed with more autopoetic aplomb. Think of the gestures of courtly love—the elaborate bows and curtsies, as well as all the motions and emotions involved in delivering secret amorous messages. The medium here, long before McLuhan, was the message. It meant less what the poem conveyed, than the heart-sick knight convey the poem with suitably legible and emphatic gestures. Today, in contrast, the less detectable the romantic gesture, accomplished via an expressionless mouse-click or text message, the more likely it is to succeed. In short, the gesture—itself presumed to be one of the ways in which the human departs from the animal—became less and less a sign pointing to itself (as if to say: “Attention. Humanity at work!”), and more and more an ambient cue or direction, withdrawn into the wider environment, allowing the work of the human to proceed without reflection or objection. (According to this logic, Italians are yet to fully enter the modern era.)

Let us return, then, to the gesture of introducing. In keeping with the modern/premodern conceit; in days of yore, the introduction of one person to another (or one person to a group), involved a rather complex understanding, orchestral command,
of elements including the birth, station, social trajectory, ambition, and potential valences of the people being introduced. If the gesture were not suitably baroque and garrulous, then the new acquaintance would risk cracking, like a glass-blown vase, taken too soon out of the furnace. Today’s newly forged relationships are no less burdened by the elements listed above, but these must under no circumstances be explicitly acknowledged. The person charged with the gesture of introducing is no longer a master of ceremonies, but rather an usher of supreme discretion, or an agent charged with making a swift and quiet connection between assassins in a public place. Identities must be affirmed, of course. But the new relationship must not be considered of a different kind, cloth, or quality to any other. In the modern age, all relationships are equally important (and thus equally trivial), at least in theory. (Being introduced to a celebrity or VIP thus retains powerful pre-modern resonances.) The gesture of introducing officiates over a formal ceremony of transformation — turning strangers into acquaintances. However, as we’ve already noted, the gesture cannot be too formal. It cannot draw attention to itself, lest it risk the ease of this transformation. The gesture of introduction should thus be an embodiment of ease; a kind of subtle social alchemy.

But we do more than just introduce people to other people. We also introduce people to notions, possibilities, concepts, and ideas. When introducing such nebulous things to others, the gesture becomes more performative again, retaining those pre-modern traces of volubility. Think of the professor at the lectern, or pacing the stage, deploying an entire repertoire of gestures, borrowed from the public bank of intellectualized hand motions, to trace the contours of mental activity and exploration. We also introduce others to objects and things. Once again, this gesture is also more atavistic than when introducing our fellow men and women to each other, probably because it is beholden to the fetishistic power of the commodity. Things, perhaps ironically, retain a residue of enchantment, before the world was sandblasted by secularistic materialism. Even objects as common and banal as those found in Walmart
or Ikea lay claim to some kind of agency or aura, thanks to the transitive powers of advertising. And thus, the gesture of introducing an object (“Behold, the new iPhone”) is supremely self-conscious; the grimace of the model on *The Price Is Right*, introducing an expensive barbecue set, or the smug pucker of the tech-entrepreneur, strutting around on a stage like some kind of turtle-necked courtier, in charge of acquisitions. (And it will truly be a sign of our ultimate assimilation of technology when we introduce new platforms and gadgets with the “cool” insouciance adopted when introducing humans to other humans.)

Indeed, we introduce people to many other things besides. Places. Spaces. Art works. Lifestyles. Secrets. The list goes on. One of the most cherished gestures amongst literary types like myself, is introducing someone to a beloved author. I was first introduced to Vilém Flusser’s work by another book I was reading, and I am eternally grateful to the author of this book for making our acquaintance, for Flusser’s words have changed the way I see the world (including the way I see words themselves). Sometimes delayed gestures, performed across both time and space, are the most consequential.

Moreover, one of the other most cherished gestures — once again, amongst literary types — is being introduced to a beloved co-author. I was first introduced to my collaborator, Carla Nappi, by the editor of a cultural magazine in New York City. This editor had organized an event at a major art museum, in which 26 people gave a mini-lecture about 26 different animals, arranged in order from smallest to largest. I re-introduced the horse to this audience, and Carla reintroduced the phoenix. Upon this first meeting, we discovered we were both in the midst of manuscripts inspired by Italo Calvino. And a few months later, we even presented our works to the world, now entangled through some hasty yet ingenious stitching operations. We then turned to Flusser as our muse, as he challenged us to really *observe* and *consider* the gestures that we so often take for granted, or with a pinch of salt. (We so often, for instance, talk of the photographer or the photograph, forgetting completely to take account of the
gesture of photographing which connects these two icons of the art world.)

Which is to say that perhaps the most consummate and exquisite gestures are the ones performed by the cosmos itself, rather than by the people who presume they are the sole authors or executors of these events. For when the universe introduces something into the flow of life, or the fabric of the situation, it does so without fanfare or warning. And then withdraws silently to watch what unfolds.