



## The Hand That Touches the Arm

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"The Hand That Touches the Arm" examines man-woman interactions in Hollywood films ranging from the 1930s to the early 1960s. By highlighting the different ways men touched women's arms, hands, shoulders, or elbows, the video essay unveils the gender dynamics that marked classical Hollywood cinema, drawing attention to their coercive nature.

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### Creator's Statement

I remember when it started. A few years ago, I was watching *Top Hat* (1935) at home, when, in an ordinary transition scene, Ginger Rogers headed for a carriage parked outside her hotel. As she climbed into the vehicle, the doorman promptly approached and touched her elbow. The gesture fluidly followed her movement as she entered the car, denoting courtesy and diligence on the part of the doorman. Yet, for me, that touch immediately triggered a sensation of estrangement, transfiguring an ordinary moment into something aberrant.



Ginger Rogers, of course, did not need that ‘hand’ to climb into the car. Nor did the gesture help her to achieve that in any practical way. This is a gesture of pure *mise-en-scène*: it prompts an extra to momentarily take part in the main action, enhancing the scene’s cohesiveness and dynamism. It shows that the doorman isn’t part of an inert background, but that he is alive and alert, and so is the diegetic world surrounding the scene. At the same time, it ensures that Ginger Rogers’s body doesn’t go wandering around, loose and unmoored. It protects this body, preventing it from being exposed to the countless risks of living, such as climbing a couple of stairs or crossing a street. But, above all, it marks this touched body as a gendered body, a woman’s body: a body that must be taken care of, led, controlled.

After that moment, I started seeing the gesture everywhere. It appeared mostly in Hollywood films from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. But not only in those. The gesture is also frequent in films from the same period made in other countries, from Germany to Brazil to France. But in the Hollywood movies it acquired such a degree of consistency and recurrence that it soon became clear that it was part of a broader system. That system is the one Laura Mulvey spotted as early as 1975 in her examination of how the cinematic codes of mainstream cinema, particularly those of classical Hollywood, are baked into the patriarchal unconscious. Mulvey’s canonical piece introduced the term ‘male gaze’ in film studies and gave it the currency it enjoys today. Yet, as a complex and all-encompassing system, the male gaze is not limited to ocular exchanges, but involves multiple forms of interaction, including the touch.

As a gesture, the hand that touches the arm opens up in a series of others: the hand that touches is the same that leads, holds, pulls, or, in some cases, hits. In the films examined in this video essay, a slight touch on the elbow can act as an expression of chivalry and care as much as control, dominance, or violence. It was that polysemy, the way these shades of meaning and affects ambiguously overlapped sometimes in the same gesture and scene, that I was interested in exploring here.

I then started compiling clips of the various ways that, in classical Hollywood films, men touched women’s arms. I was especially interested in scenes where the touch was not the main focus of the action, but emerged casually and laterally, sometimes almost imperceptibly. In their repetition and residuality, these gestures revealed a representational system that preceded the specifics of each movie and where gender conventions went hand in hand with conventions of staging. The purpose of “The Hand That Touches the Arm” is to expose the patterns and variations of these gendered conventions of *mise-en-scène*.

The video essay includes a total of seventy shots of men touching women’s arms, hands, shoulders, elbows, or backs. These are part of a broader sample I gathered of around 250 clips of such gestures. Seventy-three different movies, all produced in Hollywood between the 1930s and the early 1960s, are featured in the video essay.

In terms of form, I decided to work only with images and sounds from the examined films, not including any voice-over commentary or title cards. I wanted to test the possibility, irresistible for any film scholar, of conveying ideas and arguments through ‘strict cinematic means.’ This established an immediate challenge since, when compared with the precision of words, images are naturally blunt tools. Yet the need to find solutions to convey ideas visually proved quite productive. One of these solutions was the use of repetition. This means that, for example, instead of pointing to a gesture in the image with a voice-over, I would use three or four shots of the same gesture from different movies, thus highlighting it through iteration. Although this may seem a dull way of making a point, it ended up suiting the expository aspect of the video essay, whose aim is to demonstrate that such gestures were not one-off occurrences, but formed a pattern that reappeared across multiple films.

However, dispensing with voice-over or intertitles meant not only looking for visual counterparts for words; it meant conveying the message in an entirely different form: not through abstract verbal reasoning, but through vital bodily responses. In this sense, the purpose of the video is not only to demonstrate the existence of those staging conventions, but to expose the viewer to their coercive nature. The video essay strips ordinary gestures of their original narrative content, rearranging them so as to account for their systemic violence. The editing follows a cumulative movement that, through iteration, seeks to produce haptic responses in the viewer. Thus, the idea of the ‘touch’ informs not only the video essay’s subject matter, but also reverberates in its form. To use Linda Williams’s (1991) terms, we could say that the goal here was to explore classical Hollywood cinema as a ‘body genre.’

I position “The Hand That Touches the Arm” halfway between scholarly research and experimental artistic practice. In this sense, the video fits into what Christian Keathley described as the ‘poetic’ or ‘expressive’ approach to video essayism, that is, films that engage “with the poetic potential of working with images and sounds, without totally abandoning the knowledge effect that we associate with the essay form” (2011: 182). This twofold approach guided both the video essay’s research and its formal investigation. On the one hand, the video essay follows an analytical impulse: it proceeds by gathering evidence and organizing it in order to make a point. Yet, on the other hand, this arrangement does not follow an explanatory model where the images are subordinated to a verbal speech. The purpose is to put the viewer in direct contact with the ambiguity of the images, so they can arrive at their conclusions by examining their own bodily responses.

## Works Cited

- Keathley, Christian. 2011. 'La *caméra-stylo*: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia', in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*. Eds. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, Routledge, pp. 176–91.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, pp. 6–18.
- Williams, Linda. 1991. 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, Volume 44, Issue 4 (Summer), pp. 2–13.

## Biography

Calac Nogueira is a film researcher, curator, and filmmaker based in Seattle, where he is a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington. He is the programmer of *Travessias Brazilian Film Festival* (Northwest Film Forum, Seattle) and curated the retrospective *Lumière cineasta* (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil [CCBB], Brazil, 2020). "The Hand That Touches the Arm" is his first found footage work.

## Review by Tracy Cox-Stanton, Savannah College of Art and Design

"The Hand That Touches the Arm" compiles numerous Hollywood cinema moments in which, indeed, a hand touches an arm. In the assembly of this supercut, the videographer's own "hand" makes important choices that frame our point of view on the subject matter, using what Lev Manovich (1999) termed "database logic" to shape insight.

The video's title, so significant in a work such as this one, is our first indication of the videographer's point of view on the material that will follow. It invites us to contemplate the sounds and images in a more observational than judgmental fashion. Imagine the difference, for instance, if the video had been titled "Manhandling." An overwhelming number of the examples we witness could, in fact, aptly bear that label, but the purposely aloof "The Hand that Touches the Arm" instead presents us with an amiable provocation: What sense will we make of these gestures? What patterns will we identify?

As the examples begin to unfold, we quickly recognize that the challenge is not just an intellectual one, but an affective one as well. The sheer number of clips, meaningfully montaged, demands our attention and troubles us in a uniquely audiovisual way. Through a logic of accumulation and contrast, the film clips affect us in a way that is anything but dispassionate, vividly revealing the hidden language of touch and requiring us to reckon with its complexity. I especially appreciate the videographer's decision to maintain the original audio from each film clip, as the verbal performances add another layer of complexity to the gestures we see, sometimes undergirding and sometimes undercutting the meanings we might garner from the images alone.

What emerges from “The Hand that Touches the Arm” is a sensory rather than a scholarly insight. While generations of film scholars have crafted arguments about the complex expressions of gendered bodies within a patriarchal society (the videographer’s statement mentions only one, Laura Mulvey), this video aims to do something else. It aims to convey the emotional resonance of a gesture, something missing in most scholarly work. And further, through a logic of accumulation that spans and glosses such a wide swath of contexts, it generates patterns and invites the viewer to make their own inquiry into what those patterns might reveal.

### Work Cited

Manovich, Lev. 1999. ‘Database as Symbolic Form’, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Volume 5, Issue 2, pp. 81–86.

### Review by Paul Morrison, Brandeis University

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin reflects on “the revolution in perception” affected by both Freud and film: “Since *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception” (1968: 235–36). Calac Nogueira’s “The Hand That Touches the Arm” both confirms and revises Benjamin’s contention. The videographic essay seeks to isolate and render analyzable a gesture—the meeting of a male hand and a female elbow—that has hitherto floated along unnoticed in classical Hollywood cinema itself. The rich abundance and variety of the cinematic evidence that Nogueira amasses more than substantiates his central contention. The male hand that touches the female elbow is the expression of a broad cultural logic, not an isolated, “auteurist” gesture. Men literally lead the way.

Nogueira advances his thesis in purely visual terms. There is no voice-over or intertitles, and although the video essay explores a variety of gestures, there is no obvious taxonomy. The gender politics of touch unites the whole, but each individual scene—one of the many pleasures of watching Nogueira’s compilation is counting the number of clips you can identify—tends to register differently. Scarlett O’Hara bounding from her carriage, barely acknowledging the guiding hand of her Black coachman, bears little resemblance, for example, to Ilsa Lund dutifully being led by Victor Laszlo to a waiting plane. The example of Scarlett suggests, of course, the complex imbrication of issues of class and race with gender, which is beyond the scope of Nogueira’s video essay. His work makes possible, however, precisely such an analysis.

Nogueira asks a great deal of his viewers: he “isolates” telling gestures, but he more or less leaves the “analysis” to the audience. What relation, for example, does his video essay posit between the “gentle” violence of “hand to elbow” contact and the overt violence of fist to face? Is the one continuous with the other? The thin skin of the inner elbow is considered by many to be an erogenous zone. Does cinema acknowledge it as such? What relation is there between the erotic and the coercive? And does anything change if it is a meeting of a female hand and a female elbow? Again, the video essay does not explicitly say, which is all to its credit. (The statement that accompanies the video essay suggests the relevance of Mulvey, but I would think a theoretician of touch would be more to the point.) “The Hand That Touches the Elbow” left me with many questions and a more nuanced understanding of the sexual politics of classical Hollywood cinema.

### Work Cited

Benjamin, Walter. 1968. ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. Schocken Books, pp. 217–51.

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