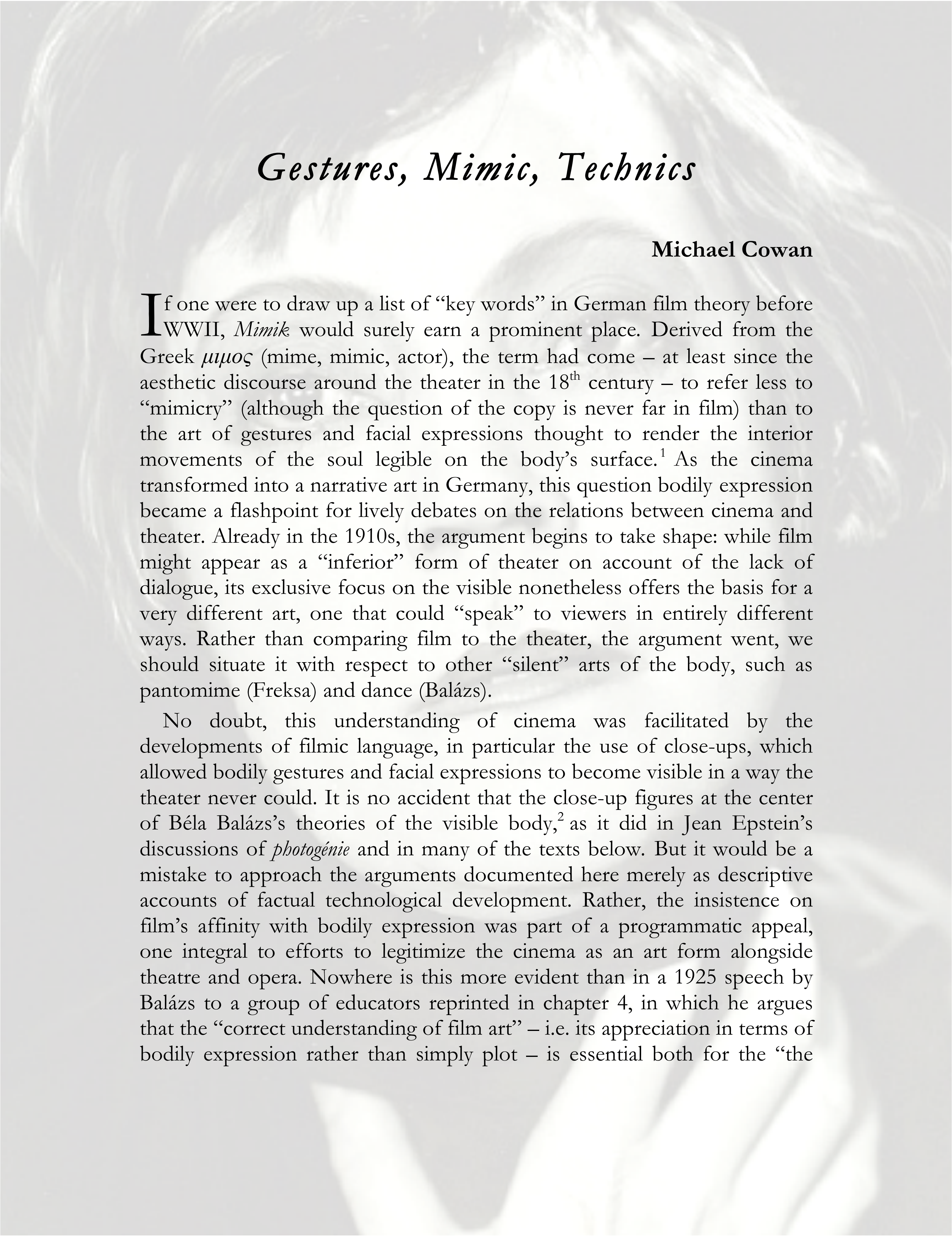
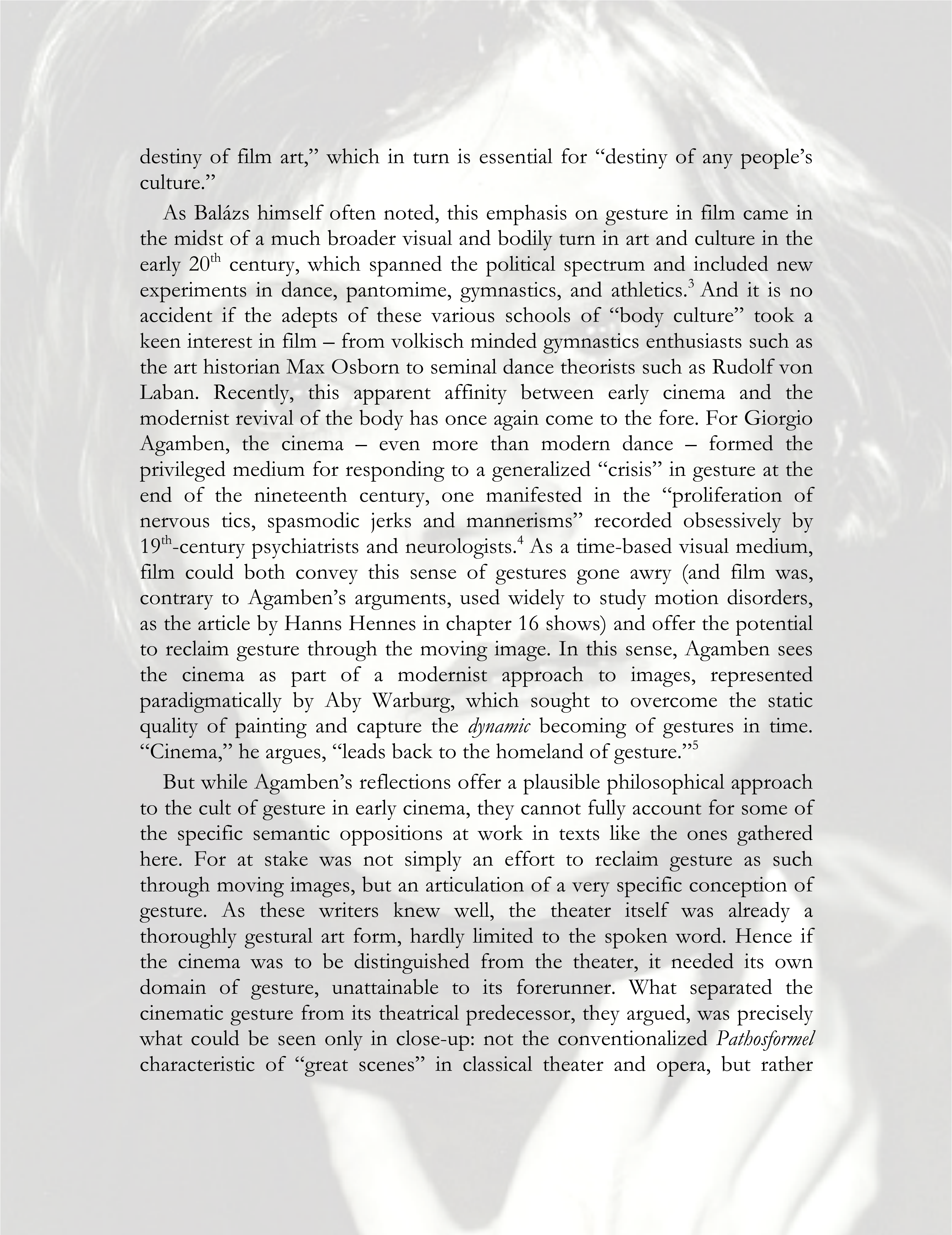


Gestures, Mimic, Technics

Michael Cowan

If one were to draw up a list of "key words" in German film theory before WWII, *Mimik* would surely earn a prominent place. Derived from the Greek *μιμος* (mime, mimic, actor), the term had come – at least since the aesthetic discourse around the theater in the 18th century – to refer less to "mimicry" (although the question of the copy is never far in film) than to the art of gestures and facial expressions thought to render the interior movements of the soul legible on the body's surface.[1] As the cinema transformed into a narrative art in Germany, this question bodily expression became a flashpoint for lively debates on the relations between cinema and theater. Already in the 1910s, the argument begins to take shape: while film might appear as a "inferior" form of theater on account of the lack of dialogue, its exclusive focus on the visible nonetheless offers the basis for a very different art, one that could "speak" to viewers in entirely different ways. Rather than comparing film to the theater, the argument went, we should situate it with respect to other "silent" arts of the body, such as pantomime (Freksa) and dance (Balázs).

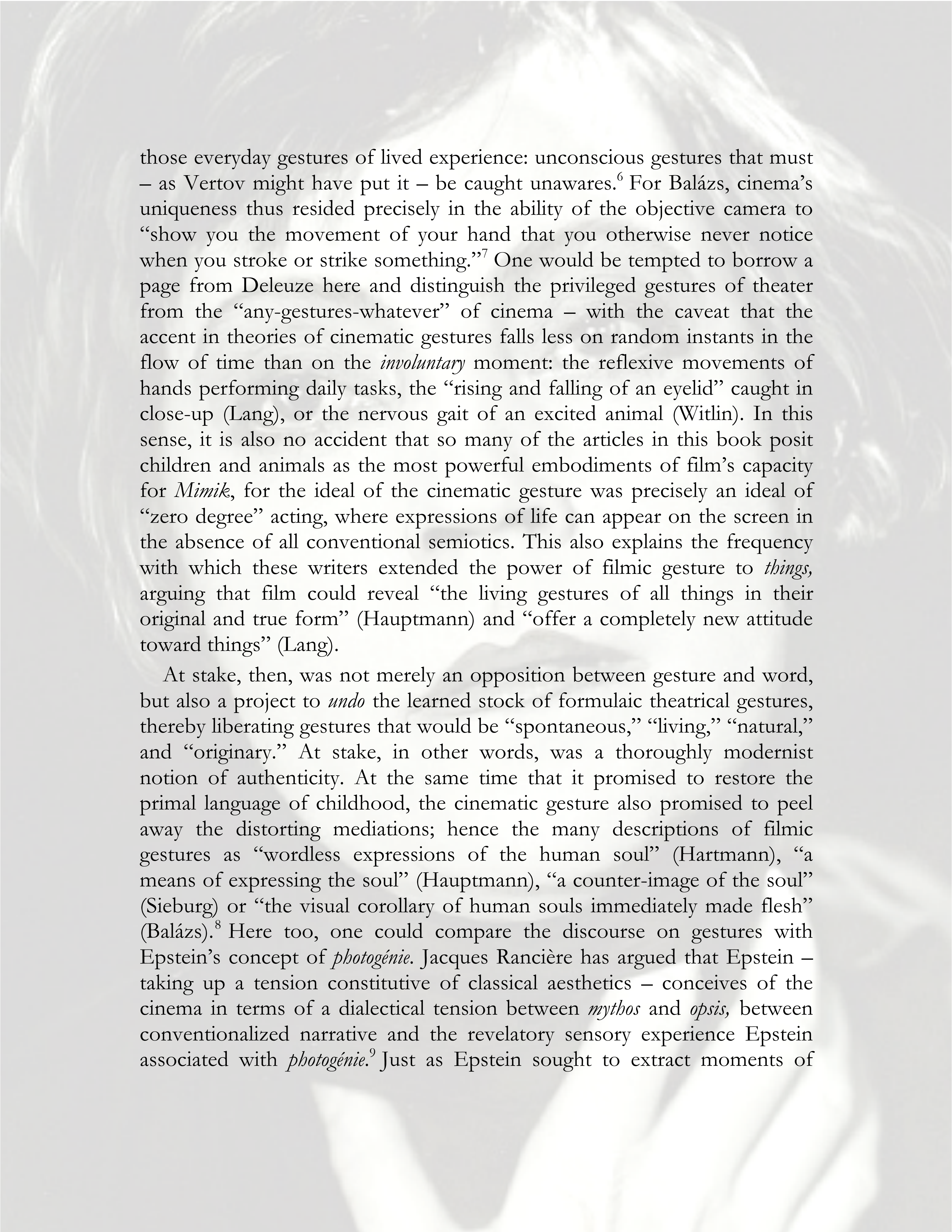
No doubt, this understanding of cinema was facilitated by the developments of filmic language, in particular the use of close-ups, which allowed bodily gestures and facial expressions to become visible in a way the theater never could. It is no accident that the close-up figures at the center of Béla Balázs's theories of the visible body,[2] as it did in Jean Epstein's discussions of *photogénie* and in many of the texts below. But it would be a mistake to approach the arguments documented here merely as descriptive accounts of factual technological development. Rather, the insistence on film's affinity with bodily expression was part of a programmatic appeal, one integral to efforts to legitimize the cinema as an art form alongside theatre and opera. Nowhere is this more evident than in a 1925 speech by Balázs to a group of educators reprinted in chapter 4, in which he argues that the "correct understanding of film art" – i.e. its appreciation in terms of bodily expression rather than simply plot – is essential both for the "the



destiny of film art," which in turn is essential for "destiny of any people's culture."

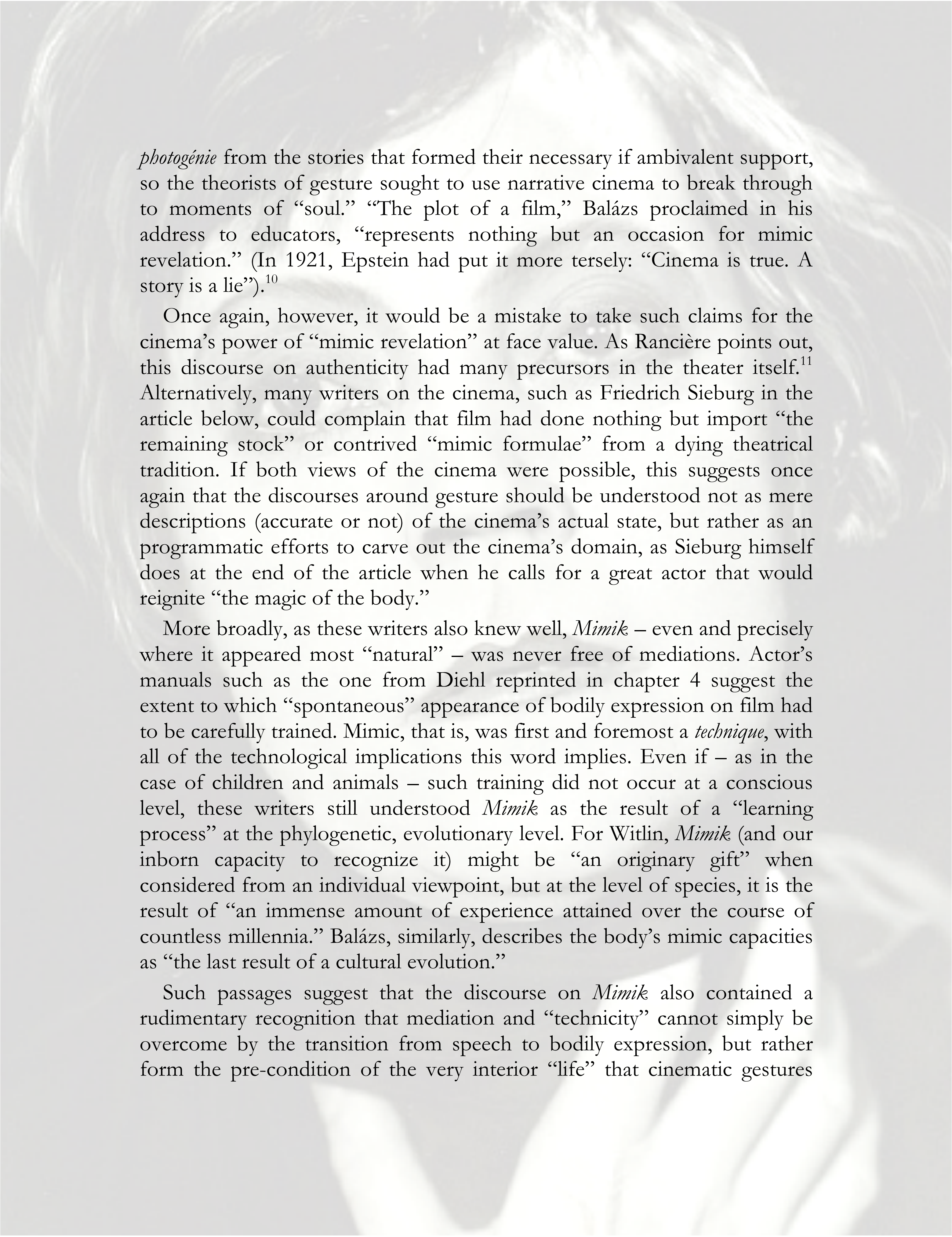
As Balázs himself often noted, this emphasis on gesture in film came in the midst of a much broader visual and bodily turn in art and culture in the early 20th century, which spanned the political spectrum and included new experiments in dance, pantomime, gymnastics, and athletics.[3] And it is no accident if the adepts of these various schools of "body culture" took a keen interest in film – from volkisch minded gymnastics enthusiasts such as the art historian Max Osborn to seminal dance theorists such as Rudolf von Laban. Recently, this apparent affinity between early cinema and the modernist revival of the body has once again come to the fore. For Giorgio Agamben, the cinema – even more than modern dance – formed the privileged medium for responding to a generalized "crisis" in gesture at the end of the nineteenth century, one manifested in the "proliferation of nervous tics, spasmodic jerks and mannerisms" recorded obsessively by 19th-century psychiatrists and neurologists.[4] As a time-based visual medium, film could both convey this sense of gestures gone awry (and film was, contrary to Agamben's arguments, used widely to study motion disorders, as the article by Hanns Hennes in chapter 16 shows) and offer the potential to reclaim gesture through the moving image. In this sense, Agamben sees the cinema as part of a modernist approach to images, represented paradigmatically by Aby Warburg, which sought to overcome the static quality of painting and capture the *dynamic* becoming of gestures in time. "Cinema," he argues, "leads back to the homeland of gesture."[5]

But while Agamben's reflections offer a plausible philosophical approach to the cult of gesture in early cinema, they cannot fully account for some of the specific semantic oppositions at work in texts like the ones gathered here. For at stake was not simply an effort to reclaim gesture as such through moving images, but an articulation of a very specific conception of gesture. As these writers knew well, the theater itself was already a thoroughly gestural art form, hardly limited to the spoken word. Hence if the cinema was to be distinguished from the theater, it needed its own domain of gesture, unattainable to its forerunner. What separated the cinematic gesture from its theatrical predecessor, they argued, was precisely what could be seen only in close-up: not the conventionalized *Pathosformel* characteristic of "great scenes" in classical theater and opera, but rather



those everyday gestures of lived experience: unconscious gestures that must – as Vertov might have put it – be caught unawares.[6] For Balázs, cinema's uniqueness thus resided precisely in the ability of the objective camera to "show you the movement of your hand that you otherwise never notice when you stroke or strike something."[7] One would be tempted to borrow a page from Deleuze here and distinguish the privileged gestures of theater from the "any-gestures-whatever" of cinema – with the caveat that the accent in theories of cinematic gestures falls less on random instants in the flow of time than on the *involuntary* moment: the reflexive movements of hands performing daily tasks, the "rising and falling of an eyelid" caught in close-up (Lang), or the nervous gait of an excited animal (Witlin). In this sense, it is also no accident that so many of the articles in this book posit children and animals as the most powerful embodiments of film's capacity for *Mimik*, for the ideal of the cinematic gesture was precisely an ideal of "zero degree" acting, where expressions of life can appear on the screen in the absence of all conventional semiotics. This also explains the frequency with which these writers extended the power of filmic gesture to *things,* arguing that film could reveal "the living gestures of all things in their original and true form" (Hauptmann) and "offer a completely new attitude toward things" (Lang).

At stake, then, was not merely an opposition between gesture and word, but also a project to *undo* the learned stock of formulaic theatrical gestures, thereby liberating gestures that would be "spontaneous," "living," "natural," and "originary." At stake, in other words, was a thoroughly modernist notion of authenticity. At the same time that it promised to restore the primal language of childhood, the cinematic gesture also promised to peel away the distorting mediations; hence the many descriptions of filmic gestures as "wordless expressions of the human soul" (Hartmann), "a means of expressing the soul" (Hauptmann), "a counter-image of the soul" (Sieburg) or "the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh" (Balázs).[8] Here too, one could compare the discourse on gestures with Epstein's concept of *photogénie*. Jacques Rancière has argued that Epstein – taking up a tension constitutive of classical aesthetics – conceives of the cinema in terms of a dialectical tension between *mythos* and *opsis,* between conventionalized narrative and the revelatory sensory experience Epstein associated with *photogénie*.[9] Just as Epstein sought to extract moments of

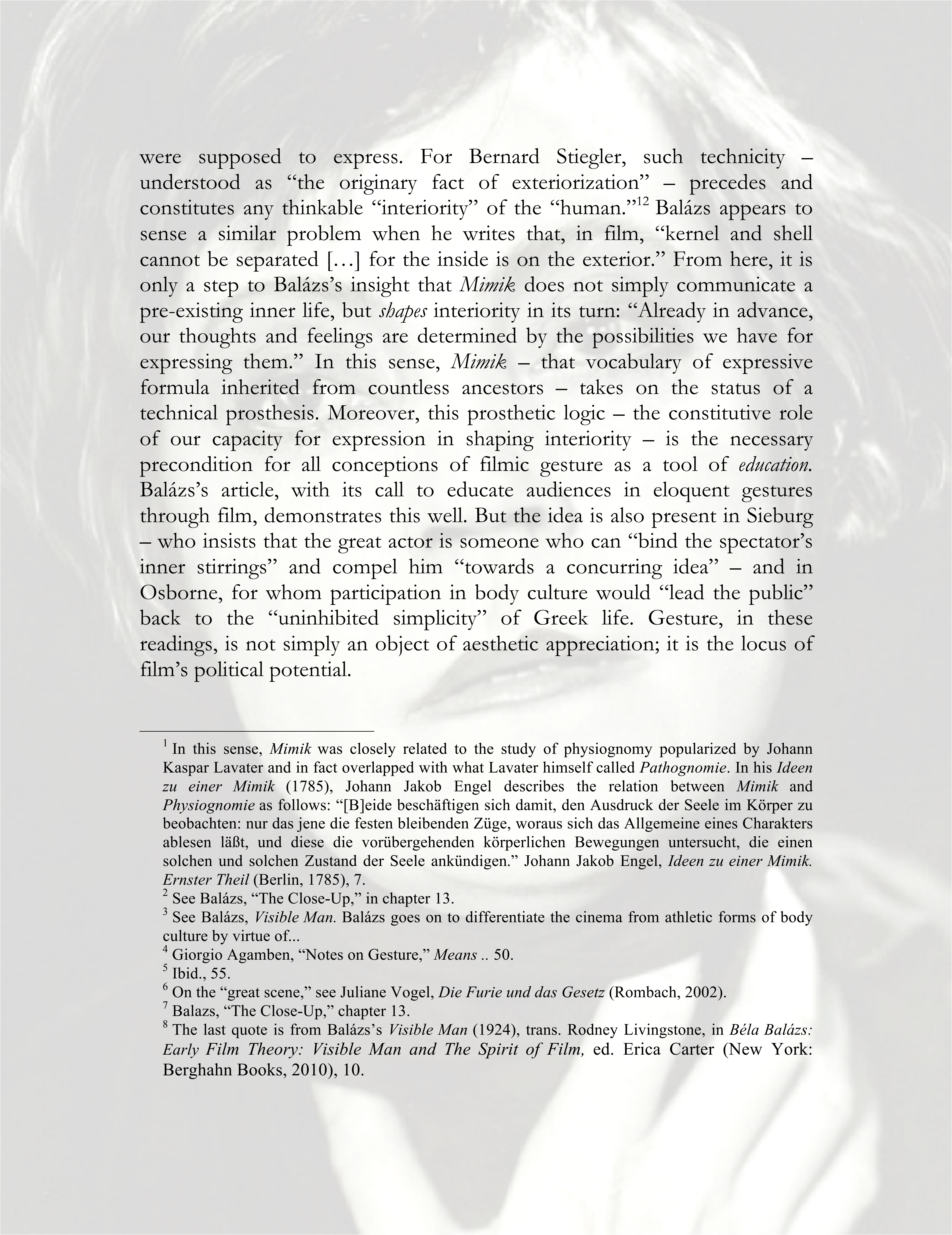


photogénie from the stories that formed their necessary if ambivalent support, so the theorists of gesture sought to use narrative cinema to break through to moments of “soul.” “The plot of a film,” Balázs proclaimed in his address to educators, “represents nothing but an occasion for mimic revelation.” (In 1921, Epstein had put it more tersely: “Cinema is true. A story is a lie”).[10]

Once again, however, it would be a mistake to take such claims for the cinema’s power of “mimic revelation” at face value. As Rancière points out, this discourse on authenticity had many precursors in the theater itself.[11] Alternatively, many writers on the cinema, such as Friedrich Sieburg in the article below, could complain that film had done nothing but import “the remaining stock” or contrived “mimic formulae” from a dying theatrical tradition. If both views of the cinema were possible, this suggests once again that the discourses around gesture should be understood not as mere descriptions (accurate or not) of the cinema’s actual state, but rather as an programmatic efforts to carve out the cinema’s domain, as Sieburg himself does at the end of the article when he calls for a great actor that would reignite “the magic of the body.”

More broadly, as these writers also knew well, *Mimik* – even and precisely where it appeared most “natural” – was never free of mediations. Actor’s manuals such as the one from Diehl reprinted in chapter 4 suggest the extent to which “spontaneous” appearance of bodily expression on film had to be carefully trained. Mimic, that is, was first and foremost a *technique*, with all of the technological implications this word implies. Even if – as in the case of children and animals – such training did not occur at a conscious level, these writers still understood *Mimik* as the result of a “learning process” at the phylogenetic, evolutionary level. For Witlin, *Mimik* (and our inborn capacity to recognize it) might be “an originary gift” when considered from an individual viewpoint, but at the level of species, it is the result of “an immense amount of experience attained over the course of countless millennia.” Balázs, similarly, describes the body’s mimic capacities as “the last result of a cultural evolution.”

Such passages suggest that the discourse on *Mimik* also contained a rudimentary recognition that mediation and “technicity” cannot simply be overcome by the transition from speech to bodily expression, but rather form the pre-condition of the very interior “life” that cinematic gestures



were supposed to express. For Bernard Stiegler, such technicity – understood as "the originary fact of exteriorization" – precedes and constitutes any thinkable "interiority" of the "human."[12] Balázs appears to sense a similar problem when he writes that, in film, "kernel and shell cannot be separated […] for the inside is on the exterior." From here, it is only a step to Balázs's insight that *Mimik* does not simply communicate a pre-existing inner life, but *shapes* interiority in its turn: "Already in advance, our thoughts and feelings are determined by the possibilities we have for expressing them." In this sense, *Mimik* – that vocabulary of expressive formula inherited from countless ancestors – takes on the status of a technical prosthesis. Moreover, this prosthetic logic – the constitutive role of our capacity for expression in shaping interiority – is the necessary precondition for all conceptions of filmic gesture as a tool of *education*. Balázs's article, with its call to educate audiences in eloquent gestures through film, demonstrates this well. But the idea is also present in Sieburg – who insists that the great actor is someone who can "bind the spectator's inner stirrings" and compel him "towards a concurring idea" – and in Osborne, for whom participation in body culture would "lead the public" back to the "uninhibited simplicity" of Greek life. Gesture, in these readings, is not simply an object of aesthetic appreciation; it is the locus of film's political potential.

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[1] In this sense, *Mimik* was closely related to the study of physiognomy popularized by Johann Kaspar Lavater and in fact overlapped with what Lavater himself called *Pathognomie*. In his *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1785), Johann Jakob Engel describes the relation between *Mimik* and *Physiognomie* as follows: "[B]eide beschäftigen sich damit, den Ausdruck der Seele im Körper zu beobachten: nur das jene die festen bleibenden Züge, woraus sich das Allgemeine eines Charakters ablesen läßt, und diese die vorübergehenden körperlichen Bewegungen untersucht, die einen solchen und solchen Zustand der Seele ankündigen." Johann Jakob Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik. Ernster Theil* (Berlin, 1785), 7.

[2] See Balázs, "The Close-Up," in chapter 13.

[3] See Balázs, *Visible Man.* Balázs goes on to differentiate the cinema from athletic forms of body culture by virtue of...

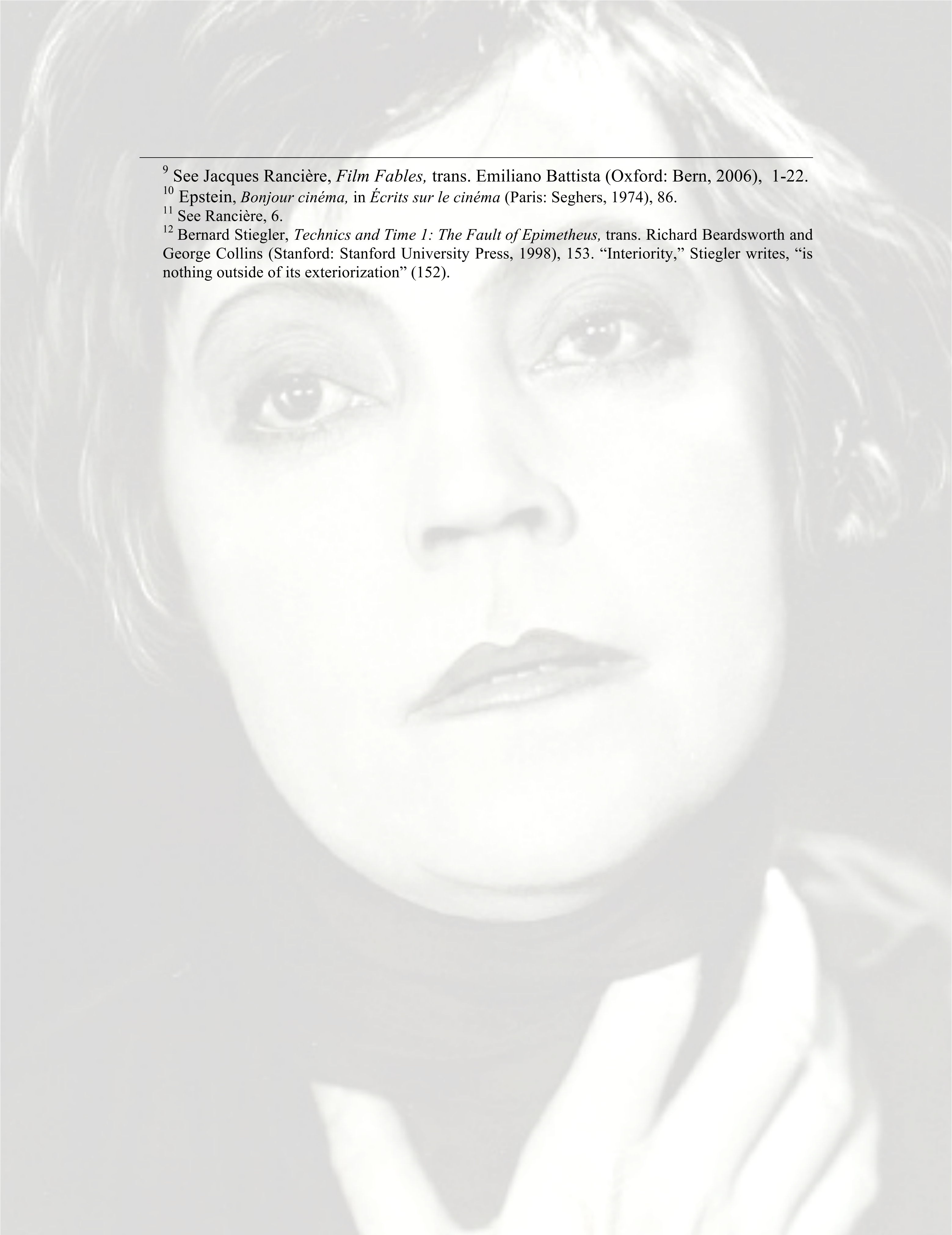
[4] Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," *Means* .. 50.

[5] Ibid., 55.

[6] On the "great scene," see Juliane Vogel, *Die Furie und das Gesetz* (Rombach, 2002).

[7] Balazs, "The Close-Up," chapter 13.

[8] The last quote is from Balázs's *Visible Man* (1924), trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film,* ed. Erica Carter (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 10.



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[9] See Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables,* trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Bern, 2006), 1-22.

[10] Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma,* in *Écrits sur le cinéma* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 86.

[11] See Rancière, 6.

[12] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus,* trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 153. “Interiority,” Stiegler writes, “is nothing outside of its exteriorization” (152).