

11 | *Excelsior as Mass Ornament*
The Reproduction of Gesture

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Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery, and railways, and locomotives, and electrical telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts & Co., Jupiter as against the lightning rod, and Hermes as against Crédit Mobilier? (Karl Marx, 1848)¹

In her 1984 ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, Donna Haraway declared: ‘the relation between organism and machine has been a border war’ in Western science and politics – which for her primarily amounted to a racist, male-dominated capitalism, as embodied by the notion of technological progress. Her manifesto identified that ‘The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction and imagination’, each of these zones representing its own contentious interface between organism and machine within American post-industrial society: the encroachment of robots in industrial production; the use of test tubes for reproducing the body; the ascendancy of sci-fi imagination in literature and film.² And in each case the battles weren’t being won by humans. Haraway was instead confident of a machine victory, pushing her towards a notorious conclusion: we are cyborgs.

The historical and cultural coordinates of the present essay are far removed from Haraway’s manifesto. My topic, the technophile ballet *Excelsior*, which premiered at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala on 11 January 1881, pre-dates Haraway’s ironic dream of the cyborg by more than a century; in place of Silicon Valley, I take my bearings from late nineteenth-century Milan’s urbanism and nascent industrial culture. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that Haraway’s celebration of the cyborg can withstand significant counterpoint with this much earlier Italian ballet, both in terms of its technological plot and of its techno-political gestural vocabulary. My argument will be that *Excelsior* presents us with proto-robotic dance: an anachronistic juxtaposition that can be illuminating because it encourages us to detect in the ballet’s unique late nineteenth-century configuration of

¹ K. Marx 1904, 310. ² Haraway 1991, 150.

technology, music and dance more enduring temporalities, temporalities that might begin to suggest an archaeology of gesture for the machine age.³

Here we confront a long-standing historiographical default: one that tends to conflate the modern with the machine in the history of music and dance.⁴ It is not my intention to increase the brisk scholarly traffic that already runs between these terms. I take my cue instead from an influential study that traces the ebb and flow of operatic gesture throughout the nineteenth century. Mary Ann Smart has described the mutual construction of philosophical and aesthetic discourses and the gestural practices of opera singers, describing a broad shift during the century from musical miming towards ‘gestures becoming invisible to music’.⁵ While ballet possesses gestural conventions clearly distinct from those of opera, Smart’s discursive and cultural approach leads me to seek out more local, flexible interactions between music and movement in which mimetic and anti-mimetic impulses are potentially in constant tension. My interest here will be the historical relationship between gesture in ballet and the prevailing conditions of social production, which in late nineteenth-century Italy were increasingly (though by no means largely) machine-based, yet not what might elsewhere be described as modern.⁶ This pre-cybernetic critical-theoretical issue of body, gesture and production will ultimately lead me to revisit Siegfried Kracauer’s 1927 essay, ‘The Mass Ornament’, to suggest alternative ways in which music and movement could enfold an industrial milieu.

Kaleidoscopic Visions

We had been talking about it for six months; we had known of its highly courageous subject; and after the rehearsals, we had learned all the particulars, the rumoured marvels of Manzotti’s creation . . . The only worrying aspect, which put doubt in apprehensive minds, was its libretto. Despite the almost bizarre boldness of its concept, the libretto seemed to be a pandemonium, an impenetrable patchwork, from which nothing could emerge except an unfinished *féerie*, or a revue in the style of Scalvini. However, the pessimists were wrong, and when *Excelsior* was seen and

³ The instigator of archaeological approaches to history was of course Michel Foucault: see Foucault 1971. There have been more recent attempts to adapt Foucault’s ideas to media technologies in particular; see Huhtamo and Parikka 2011.

⁴ For a recent discussion of this issue, see McCarren 2003. See also Garelick 1999.

⁵ Smart 2004, 4. Opera and ballet shared the same performance space: *Excelsior*’s premiere took place following a performance of Filippo Marchetti’s *Ruy Blas* (1869), then a stalwart of La Scala’s repertory.

⁶ See Crepax 2002, 19–125.

admired, all agreed that the topic was not only extremely fine, but that Manzotti had managed to turn it into a real ballet: interesting, wonderful, a choreographic work – or, better, a masterpiece.⁷

Critical hyperbole aside – there would be much of this in the wake of the ballet's premiere – it is not hard to see why the pre-released libretto generated doubts.⁸ *Excelsior's* plot, as outlined by its choreographer Luigi Manzotti, summarises four centuries of humanity's moral progress as manifested in various technological breakthroughs.⁹ It opens during the benighted times of the Spanish Inquisition, as a troop of martyrs-to-be trudge, *Don Carlos*-like, across the proscenium; against this gloomy backdrop, *Oscurantismo* and *Luce* (Obscurantism and Light), the principal mime characters, emerge, staging an allegorical contest between the forces of good and evil. *Luce* eventually gains the upper hand, and predicts a future in which all barbarity will come to an end: a utopia of world peace disclosed by the sudden appearance of hundreds of dancers, mimes, children and acrobats. This is the moment captured on the front cover of *Il teatro illustrato* (see Figure 11.1), and was one of *Excelsior's* most widely discussed special effects.

With this spectacular future in view – a future that was confidently imperial, to judge from the imposing *mise en scène* – *Excelsior* proceeds more-or-less chronologically from sixteenth-century Spain towards the present, though with every new scene the location of the story changes. The next scene features Denis Papin, supposed inventor of the steam engine, who floats along Germany's river Weser by means of a paddle-wheel boat. In Manzotti's loose interpretation of historical record, Papin is attacked and killed by villagers who mistake his invention for sorcery.¹⁰ As though to redeem

⁷ 'Erano sei mesi che se ne parlava, che si conosceva il soggetto arditissimo e che poscia dalle prove si sapevano tutti i particolari, le supposte meraviglie della creazione manzottiana . . . Il solo che prometteva poco e che anzi metteva dei dubbi nella coscienza timorata degli eterni pessimisti, era il libretto, il quale oltre l'arditezza quasi strana del concetto, pareva un pandemonio, un guazzabuglio inestricabile da cui non potesse uscire che una *féerie* sconclusionata, od una Rivista ad uso Scalvini. Anche costoro ebbero torto e quando l'*Excelsior* fu veduto e ammirato, tutti convennero che non solamente era il soggetto bellissimo, ma che il Manzotti era riuscito a farne un vero ballo, interessante, splendido, un lavoro, o a meglio dire, un capolavoro coreografico.' Filippi 1881, 1–2.

⁸ Manzotti 1881.

⁹ The initial consternation was not necessarily generated by the technological theme: as José Sasportes has pointed out, choreographer Luigi Danesi had covered the invention of electricity in his 1873 ballet *Alessandro Volta, o Il telegrafo elettrico*. The cause for concern instead seems to have been over Manzotti's ability to combine the disparate elements into a choreographic whole (Sasportes 1987, 310).

¹⁰ Denis Papin, a French physicist and mathematician, described a mechanism for the basic steam engine in 1690; and, as *Excelsior* claims, he did at some point in the early eighteenth century attempt to propel boats using steam power. Little is known about the circumstances of his

IL TEATRO ILLUSTRATO

PREZZI D'ABBONAMENTO: Anno I. 4. — Sem. I. 2. —
 France di fuori del Reno. » 8. — » 4. —
 Stati dell'Unione Postale (in oro) » 10. — » 5. —
 Africa, America del Nord. » 12. — » 6. —
 America del Sud, Asia, Austr. » 15. — » 7. 50. —
 Un numero separato Cost. 50 in tutta Italia.

Anno I. — Marzo 1881. — N. 3.

EDUARDO SONZOGNO
 EDITORE
 Milano. — Via Pasquale, N. 14.

AVVERTENZE.
 Gli abbonati annui ricevono in dono, nel corso dell'anno, QUATTRO COMPOSIZIONI MUSICALI, oltre ad un'originale Copertina per finire la volume in discesa dell'annata. — Tutti gli abbonati riceveranno gratis la discesa di Dicembre 1880. — Prezzi delle inserzioni nella copertina Cent. 50 per ogni linea o spazio di linea.



TEATRO ALLA SCALA DI MILANO. — EXCELSIOR, azione coreografica di LUIGI MANZOTTI.

Figure 11.1 Front cover of *Il teatro illustrato* (March 1881).

death, however, and the peasant ambush was Manzotti's embellishment. See McConnell 2004, 42:597–9. See also Hills 1993, 15–16.

Papin's death, Luce appears once again to foretell the steam engine's enormous importance: images of ocean liners and steam trains appear against the backdrop of a New York skyline. The next scene, also characterised by a transatlantic shift, begins at Lake Como, in Alessandro Volta's laboratory; the invention of electricity is about to take place. Once this has been achieved – it is delayed by another mimed contest between Luce and Oscurantismo – sparks fly and the trilling of an electric bell transports us to Telegraph Square in Washington, DC. Here a troupe of ballerina-couriers, dressed in post office uniform and carrying messages, commemorate the electrical telegraph, one of many distant ramifications of Volta's discovery.

The alternation between intimate scenes of mimed narration – focused on the eternal struggle between Luce and Oscurantismo – and large-scale choreographic moments representing humanity at large continues throughout the ballet. *Excelsior's* structure was the norm in its genre, the late nineteenth-century *ballo grande*, which employed conventional narrative formulae to give coherence to heavily peopled dances and spectacular stage effects.¹¹ The latter involved, among other things, dramatic lighting, impressive costumes, acrobatics and even onstage animals. Notoriously, Manzotti's next *ballo grande* at La Scala, *Amor* (Love; also 'Roma' spelled backwards), was to incorporate twelve horses, two oxen and an elephant.¹² The final segments of *Excelsior* include spectacular effects inspired by two recent, enormous industrial projects: the nations of the world meet along the Suez Canal, providing the opportunity to display multiple national garbs; and the ballet's *coup de théâtre*, the perforation of the Mont Cenis Tunnel, recently connecting Italy and France through the Alps, giving rise to a sequence that ends with miners from both sides joyfully embracing. Pursuing the theme of international cooperation, the final scene is a ceremonial 'Quadriglia allegorico-fantastico delle nazioni' (Allegorical-Fantastical Quadrille of the Nations) – an apotheosis to Luce, while at the front of the stage Oscurantismo lies eternally vanquished.

Excelsior's optimistic conclusion draws strength from a temporal ambiguity: if the final defeat of Oscurantismo represents a final step in the process of Enlightenment, does this moment lie in the present or in the

¹¹ This structural alternation between dance and mime was standard in the late nineteenth-century *ballo grande*, as it was in the early nineteenth-century *coreodramma*. As Sasportes (2011, 185–233) has pointed out, the distinction became less strict as the century wore on, with choreographers attempting smoother connections between the two – a trend that is reflected in *Excelsior* – and celebrated dancers, such as Enrico Cecchetti, managing to combine the two styles in performance.

¹² See Toelle 2009, 20.

near (yet endlessly receding) future? The powerful contradictions of ‘living progress’ might seem all too familiar to us now.¹³ In Milan in 1881 this ideology had particular local significance, as observed by critics at the ballet’s premiere: *Excelsior* was synergetic with the transformation of the city and the excitement for technological display brought about by that year’s National Exposition. Over the course of seven months, hundreds of thousands of visitors arrived in Milan by train, then to be transported from the Central Station to the Exposition site by means of a purpose-built railroad.¹⁴ *Excelsior*, throughout this time, remained a fixture onstage at La Scala, providing conspicuous theatrical continuation of Milan’s industrial festivities.

There are more deeply-woven threads connecting *Excelsior* and the Exposition – threads that transect meanings only ever latent in contemporary journalistic discourse. To get at these meanings, it is worth pausing over the opening sequence to observe the terms in which reviewers described *Excelsior*’s instantly overwhelming effect. Influential music critic Salvatore Farina praised Manzotti’s choreography as ‘magnificence without confusion’, and summed up the ballet’s technological theme and visual style as ‘a great phantasmagoria of progress’.¹⁵ Another revered commentator, Filippo Filippi, referred to the ballet’s ‘first kaleidoscopic impression’, and went on to compare its fantastical quality with a magic lantern show.¹⁶ And, in fact, the idea of kaleidoscope was elaborately developed throughout *Excelsior*’s early journalistic reception:

Have you ever looked into a kaleidoscope? If so, imagine Manzotti’s choreographic moves taking place within it, inside the kaleidoscope. The thousand combinations of extremely varied colours, the elegance of the moves, the novelty of the ensemble, the importance of invention – everything reveals *Excelsior* as the work of a master.¹⁷

These anonymous words can begin to revive the sense of animation kindled by the sudden mass choreography, a fascination with colour and geometry in motion.¹⁸

¹³ On the pitfalls of synoptic strategies in the history of technology, see L. Marx 2010.

¹⁴ See Lopez 1981, 7–8.

¹⁵ ‘grandiosità senza confusione’; ‘grandiosa fantasmagoria del progresso’. Farina 1881, 22.

¹⁶ ‘prima caleidoscopica impressione’. Filippi 1881, 1–2.

¹⁷ ‘Avete mai guardato in un caleidoscopio? Se sì, immaginate le mosse coreografiche del Manzotti quali vi si presentano là dentro, nel caleidoscopio. Le mille combinazioni di svariatissimi colori, l’eleganza delle mosse, la novità dell’assieme, l’importanza delle trovate, tutto, tutto rivela nell’*Excelsior* il lavoro di un maestro.’ [unsigned] 1881b, 1.

¹⁸ Another contemporary review described the dazzling effect of sheer numbers on stage, stressing their colourful costumes and geometrical arrangement: ‘Then the city disappears, the ruins fade away in an instant and we see a scene that puts a break, for a moment, on the excitement; such is

The kaleidoscope was a multiply determined metaphor in early discussions of *Excelsior*, allowing critics to broach not only choreographic matters, but also the issues of La Scala's stage mechanics and its novel, controversial system of gas lighting. As Jutta Toelle has shown, Milan's foremost theatre was navigating murky financial waters in the last decades of the nineteenth century, drifting between a system of elite patronage and increasing local government control (not to mention the absence of state subsidy).¹⁹ Loosely referencing this context, Farina took the opportunity to complain about the stage illumination, 'those zones of eternal shadow and semi-darkness, that lack of speed and precision', appealing to the municipal council for swift action.²⁰ The *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* similarly alluded to the theatre's technical deficiencies:

We have mentioned the miracles of La Scala's old mechanism, and we return to this topic to say that ours is no longer an age of miracles, and we should think about how to promote La Scala – let's not say to the summit of its fame, but at least to a level of equality with second-rate stages in Paris and Vienna.²¹

the stupor, the astonishment that it awakens. It is an empyrean of light, in which are gathered more than 400 people, among them ballerine, ballerini, chorus dancers, acrobats, extras and a small contingent of wonderful girls and boys under the age of ten . . . Those configurations, those novelties, those *ideas* are impossible to describe: you must go and see them.' ('Allora la città svanisce, i ruderi si sprofondano in un attimo e si vede una scena che mette freno per un poco all'entusiasmo, tanto è lo stupore, lo sbalordimento che desta. È un empireo inondante di luce, ove stanno aggruppate più di 400 persone, fra ballerine, ballerini, corifei, tramagnini, comparse, e un piccolo esercito di brave ragazzine e di bimbi al disotto dei dieci anni . . . Quegli intrecci, quelle novità, quelle *trovate*, non si possono descrivere, bisogna andare a vederle.') [unsigned] 1881a.

¹⁹ On the economic vicissitudes of La Scala see Toelle 2009, 62–80; and on theatrical illumination in Milan, see Protano-Biggs 2013.

²⁰ 'quelle zone di ombre e di penombre eterne, quella mancanza di prontezza e di precisione'. Farina 1881, 22.

²¹ 'Abbiamo accennato ai miracoli del vecchio meccanismo della Scala; e vi ritorniamo per dire che non è più età di miracoli, e che è doveroso si pensi a mettere il palcoscenico della Scala, non diremo all'altezza della sua fama, ma almeno a pari dei palcoscenici dei teatri di second'ordine di Parigi e Vienna.' Farina 1881, 22. In reviews of *Excelsior*, there was a more general tendency to compare La Scala (whether favourably or not) with other European stages, thus registering the ballet's (and the theatre's) cosmopolitan aspirations. Filippi boasted that 'outside of La Scala there is no other theatre, neither in Italy nor abroad, which can offer equal means of reproduction' ('all'infuori della Scala non havvi altro teatro, nè in Italia nè all'estero, che possa offrire eguali mezzi di riproduzione'), though he went on to admit that 'the only improvement there could be in Paris, in Vienna, in London, or in Berlin is in the scenography and in the machinery, which in La Scala, though much improved, still leave not a small amount to be desired' ('la sola superiorità ci potrebbe esserci a Parigi, a Vienna, a Londra, a Berlino sia nelle scene e nei meccanismi, che alla Scala, benchè progrediti da molto, lasciano ancora, e non poco, a desiderare'). Filippi 1881, 1.

Excelsior's technological theme and stage effects recursively drew back on La Scala itself, drawing attention to its own ageing stage machinery – a shift of attention onto old technology that might explain why the kaleidoscope became a trope during *Excelsior's* initial reception. For the kaleidoscope, much like La Scala's machinery, was itself growing old in 1881. Invented by David Brewster in 1817, the device enjoyed an extended heyday during the first half of the nineteenth century: it was hailed as an infinite source of colourful, symmetrical patterns – patterns that could be traced and reproduced on ornaments, wallpaper and decorative fabrics. As Jonathan Crary has pointed out, the kaleidoscope came to represent an 'industrial mechanical means for the reformation of art according to an industrial paradigm'.²² Yet by the 1880s, dreams of infinite serial production gave way to soberer reflections, and kaleidoscopic enthusiasms had for the most part largely dropped away. Art historian Arnaud Maillet has shown that attitudes toward the kaleidoscope underwent a general shift, one intimately connected to changing notions about the capacities and limits of factory production.²³ By century's end, the device had become a way of talking about human creativity and innovation as an endless mechanical process, monotonously recombining fragments of sensory stimulation.

Exposition Narratives

This kaleidoscopic way of seeing – an historical gaze inured to industrial enthusiasms – had particular resonance in Milan in 1881. Around the city centre, street lamps were interwoven with trees and exotic plants, while the city's central Public Gardens were converted into a fantastical landscape for the exhibition of machines. Entry to the gardens was granted via a series of kiosks, each inspired by human habitations from around the globe, such as the much admired Russian *izba*; the price of admission was one lira, the cost of a dozen eggs.²⁴ From any one of the gates dotted around the perimeter, the visitor could proceed into the gardens either on foot or, for an additional fee, on board an electric train – the first of several transportation amusements within the Exposition site that included a hydraulic lift, hot air balloon and hand-cranked unicycle running along an overhead track. Transport-based entertainments were immensely popular, paving the way for the fairground rides of the modern theme park,

²² Crary 1990, 116. ²³ Maillet 2012, 36–55. ²⁴ Lopez 1981, 7–8.

while also providing mini-demonstrations of machines on display within the Exposition's halls.²⁵

Impressive warehouses of brick and glass, these halls were patent intruders amid the greenery of the Public Gardens and contained rooms dedicated to the fine arts, military uniforms, locomotives, combustion engines and musical instruments, among many other things.²⁶ One of the most successful exhibits was the so-called Work Gallery (*Galleria del lavoro*): it comprised a series of warehouse-like rooms run by Italian and foreign firms, each manned by workers demonstrating artisanal skills and the use of industrial machines.²⁷ Diverse commodities-in-the-making included leather wallets, notebooks, artificial flowers, jewellery made of gold and diamonds; visitors could even observe as the Exposition's own weekly illustrated newspaper, *Milano e l'Esposizione*, was being printed. The paper reflexively described the environment in which it was produced:

All the machines are in operation: the bustle is very lively: the workers attend to their work under the eyes of the public as though they were in their factories . . . In the (adjacent) Gallery of Small Industries, here too is working life; here too there are fast wheels, the turning of handles and of leather pulleys: mechanical forces that enhance, extend and collaborate with those of man.²⁸

The newspaper's pervasive fascination with the interaction between workers and machinery is keenly expressed here; emphasised too is the public's unusual proximity to the mass production of various items and the dynamics of spectatorship involved. Visitors were cordoned off from the workers by a guardrail that marked a persistent border extending throughout the Work Gallery, visibly demarcating the spectacle of miscellaneous human-machine operations.²⁹ This guard rail rehearsed and rigidly defined the territories of social production,

²⁵ Della Coletta 2006, 101.

²⁶ Both the architecture and its contents were typical of Expositions during the second half of the nineteenth century; see Hamon 1992, 3–14.

²⁷ On the Work Gallery, see [unsigned] 1881c, 11, 26, 146.

²⁸ 'Tutte le macchine sono in azione: il movimento è vivissimo: gli operai attendono all'opera, sotto gli occhi del pubblico come fossero nella loro officina . . . Nella Galleria delle piccole industrie c'è anche qui vita operaia; anche qui rapidità di ruote, giri di manubri e di cuoi, forze meccaniche che si sviluppano, che si trasmettono e collaborano con quelle dell'uomo.' [unsigned] 1881c, 11.

²⁹ The majority of visitors to the Exposition belonged to the middle classes; but as Guido Lopez has pointed out, the municipal council coordinated occasional trips to enable workers to visit the Exposition. See Lopez 1981, 8. For an imaginative reconstruction of workers encountering the machinery on display at an earlier industrial exposition (the 1867 Exposition Universelle) see Rancière 2011, 64–88.

preempting the cause of Haraway's 'border war' critique by more than a century. The expressionless stares of these workers may also suggest the tendency of capitalism to reduce people to the status of things, an old Marxist theme. In 1881, visitors were being encouraged to inspect workers alongside machines as comparable objects within a systematic manufacture. Workers, like machines, could be looked upon as objects with a particular capacity for labour: a calculable limit of exhaustion that appeared to represent determinate economic value.

Dancing Machines

A general mood of enervation lingers over both the Exposition and ballet, in spite of their assertive confidence in industry – an ambivalence that would pursue *Excelsior* in its performance afterlife. During the 1880s, the ballet circulated widely in multiple concurrent international tours in Europe and North America.³⁰ These performances were largely supervised by Manzotti's own students, who assiduously reproduced his choreography by means of transcriptions involving copious colour-coordinated diagrams.³¹ If we fast-forward to a major revival of *Excelsior* at La Scala in 1909, the trend continues: the ballet was supervised by Achille Coppini, La Scala's official *coreografo riproduttore* (choreographer-reproducer), whose role consisted in slavishly reviving older choreographic works. The consequent recurrence of *Excelsior's* dance steps across more than thirty years is noteworthy, for it stands in curious tension with the new production's attempt to update the ballet to reflect more recent technological advances: the ballet now included, for example, an impressive scene dedicated to the airplane, and its *mise en scène* incorporated film projections of the Suez Canal.³²

Some vintage technologies were preserved for the 1909 revival, however. This much can be seen from costume designs, such as the one worn by

³⁰ Pappacena 1998, 55–72. Pappacena's book extensively reproduces notes and diagrams from one of three surviving choreographic scores: that of Manzotti's student Giovanni Cammorano.

³¹ Detailed choreographic scores also served to enforce copyright law; see Lo Iacono 1987. As Lo Iacono points out, the choreographer was traditionally understood to be the author of the ballet work, and, as was customary, Manzotti bought the rights to the score from Marengo. When *Excelsior* became enormously successful, however, Marengo (unsuccessfully) launched a legal challenge for a share in the profits. Embittered by the experience, Marengo went on to write a manifesto, 'Per l'avvenire della musica in Italia' (1889), which has been reprinted in Fusco and Garavaglia 2008.

³² [unsigned] 1908a, 1005–8.



Figure 11.2 Costume design for 'Il telefono'.

ballerinas sustaining the role of the Telephone (see Figure 11.2). Technological paraphernalia fuse with the ballerina's body: earpieces and speaking tubes are strapped to her arms, and iron breastplates are fashioned into electromagnetic bells. Her ears are covered by electrical headphones (note the decorative sparks jutting from her head) in reference to the dynamic, turn-of-the-century occupation of switchboard telephonist.

With this prototypical fem-bot get-up, Haraway's 'border war' takes on literal meaning, the female body becoming the ground for a battle between organism and machine – a site where science fiction, sexual fantasy and technology violently intertwine.³³

In 1913, film director Luca Comerio shot Coppini's revival of *Excelsior* in a warehouse in Milan: an ambitious project that aimed to capture the ballet in its full ninety-minute duration. The project required 2,000 metres of film stock – a significant length at the time, even measured against contemporary cinematic monuments such as *Quo Vadis* (1912) and *Cabiria* (1913).³⁴ Like these better-known films, *Excelsior* was intended for theatrical performance with live orchestral accompaniment: Comerio took static shots of the entire proscenium, emulating the audio-visual experience of the theatre. On its release the film was billed as a 'cine-phono-choreographic show', stressing the novelty of this multimedia experiment: the film reimagined the screen as a surface across which bodies moved, their visible choreographies recombining in rhythmic gesture with the ballet's musical score.³⁵

Part of this film has recently been restored at Rome's Cineteca nazionale, and may be the closest we will ever come to seeing and hearing a late nineteenth-century Italian ballet. As I have been suggesting, Comerio's 1913 film remained faithful to Manzotti's original choreography, a fact which might be confirmed by comparing the film with the transcriptions drawn up by Manzotti's students in 1881.³⁶ This stability over more than thirty years is remarkable, but my point here is neither about the standardising effect of dance texts nor about the fixity of the choreographic work during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much more specifically, I want to suggest that the film clip is a distant but nonetheless loyal reproduction of *Excelsior* – one now channelled not through the lens of the kaleidoscope, but that of 1910s experimental cinema.

To this end, I would first like to describe in detail an episode from *Excelsior*'s second scene – which, as previously mentioned, follows the initial triumph of Luce over Oscurantismo that gives rise to a series of dances in praise of the former. The transcriptions from the 1880s noted

³³ In addition to Haraway, see R. Williams 2005, 50–66. ³⁴ Bondanella 2009, 8–14.

³⁵ 'azione cine-fono-coreografica'. See Mosconi 2006, 55–73. Only 350 metres of film survives today, comprising most of the opening scene dedicated to Oscurantismo and three numbers drawn from the second scene starring Luce. The film was restored at Rome's Cineteca nazionale in 2001: music was reunited with the moving image by means of piano accompaniment, synchronising Marengo's score to Manzotti's choreography once more.

³⁶ For detailed analysis of the dance, see Pappacena 1998, 78–81.

that this scene required the use of an octagonal platform with four levels in order to provide a ‘music-box effect’.³⁷ A ballerina representing Civilisation stands on top, encircled by lesser allegorical figures on the rungs below, while men in armour and white-winged children gather around the platform on the stage.³⁸ The film replicates this arrangement, also following one 1880s transcription in drastically reducing the gestural range to ‘rhythmic articulations with poses and skips’.³⁹ As the film shows, these poses involve holding a curved arm high above the head, first the left then the right, each movement marking the downbeat of every second bar. To close each eight-bar phrase, the ballerinas at stage level skip through small circles, mirrored by the children who loop round the men. This dyad of poses and circular skips comprises the first choreographic unit, evoking iterative figurines within an elaborate jewellery casket.

Some of the words from the 1880s transcriptions have been mapped onto the piano score in Example 11.1: the onset of ‘rhythmic articulations with poses and skips’ marks the beginning of the ‘Galop’, one of the ballet’s most famous musical numbers, which enjoyed extensive independent circulation in piano reduction.⁴⁰ The Galop is preceded by repeated, emphatic cadences that peter out onto a dominant pedal (bb. 1–28) – which, as the surviving film bears witness, gives the dancers time to assemble the elaborate platform. By the time the melody disintegrates into a ticking octave leap, the ballerinas get into position; then, in time for the pause (in b. 28), they gradually sink to their left in parallel over the platform. Unwound into a momentary slumber, the Galop (bb. 29–44) makes the ensemble spring to life in various stiff poses: an effect enhanced by the contrast between the Galop’s rapid pace and the dancers’ static upper-body gestures. The music thus informs us as to the nature of an old choreography, their recombination allowing us to recapture the mechanical inspiration of the gesture.

Following a transition based on concentric circles of dancers twisting around the octagonal platform, the next sequence again comprises largely fixed positions and isolated arm gestures. The rate of these gestures doubles to one per bar, creating a more fluid motion, but now only the left arm is

³⁷ ‘effetto carillon’; described in a transcription from the 1880s. This descriptive term, along with those subsequently cited, is taken from (Manzotti’s student) Giovanni Cammorano’s choreographic score, which is reproduced in Pappacena 1998, 91–118.

³⁸ These lesser allegorical figures are Valore (Valor), Costanza (Constancy), Invenzione (Invention), Concordia (Harmony) and Fama (Fame). Manzotti 1881, 8.

³⁹ ‘Scansione ritmica con pose e corsette’. Pappacena 1998, 91–118.

⁴⁰ Equally well known was the music for the ‘Fattorini del telegrafo’ (Telegraph Messengers). Music for both scenes was soon circulating in piano reduction: Marengo 1881a, 1881b.

Example 11.1 Romualdo Marengo, 'Galop', preceded by a waltz, from *Excelsior* (1881), piano reduction

(Tempo di valzer)

"effetto carillon"
(music-box effect)

= "scansione ritmica con pose e corsette"
(rhythmic articulations with poses and skips)

involved, giving the overall impression of a collective wave. This action is answered by a much slower, more deliberate one: over the course of an entire four-bar phrase the armoured men protractedly raise clubs from the stage floor, while the rest of the cast bend down equally slowly. A complementary four bars provide the opposite movement: the men lower

their clubs as the ballerinas and children gradually stretch upwards while shaking their arms and torsos. This interplay of rising and falling gestures within the group was described in the 1880s transcriptions as giving a ‘fountain effect’, the diffusion of gestures through the whole supposedly resembling a body of water majestically surging up and down.⁴¹

This is a gestural dynamic we have perhaps seen before: a similar isolation of gesture repeated across the human *mise en scène* was at play at the Work Gallery. There workers also performed beneath eyes trained on the economy of gesture: gazes attuned to the productive output that might be achieved by optimal choreography of workers and machines. The same concern with gestural economy recurs in the focus placed on the ballerinas’ arms, forming impressive, rigid postures in the upper body, creating maximum theatrical impact for minimal input from performers.⁴² This danced relationship between people and machinery hints at their dream-like synthesis, the inorganic slowness of the fountain effect transforming the onstage multitude into an immense dancing machine.

And so *Excelsior*’s movements might redirect us to the Exposition. For the dance of machines was an impressive effect, one noted by visitors to the Work Gallery and the adjacent Gallery of Machines as engines were turned on first thing in the morning – warming up with majestic, and yet laborious slowness:

At a given signal, the hundred inert parts of many steel devices began to move very slowly; then the movement became, as it went on, very quick and collective . . . And in the air – a clatter, a noise, and a flash of very bright wheels: a display that raised the spirit and made us proud.⁴³

The spectacle of machines and industrial clamour was the occasion of excitement and of pride, a context that discloses the politics of gesture: in particular, that formed by the juxtaposition of the Manzotti’s fountain effect and Marengo’s headlong Galop. Their conjunction in 1881 – the cultural superimposition that sustained the interaction between this music and this dance – was, at base, a mechanical mimicry, one that gave shape to Milan’s industrial celebrations and let them be felt.

⁴¹ ‘effetto fontana’. Pappacena 1998, 91–118.

⁴² McCarren (2003, 14–20) discusses in greater depth the confluence between nineteenth-century work-science and the development of modern dance.

⁴³ ‘Ad un dato segnale le cento parti inerti di tanti congegni d’acciaio cominciarono lentamente, lentamente a muoversi, poi il movimento si fece, come avviene, velocissimo e generale . . . E nell’aria un frastuono, un rumore, e un baleno di ruote lucidissime: uno spettacolo insomma che allargava l’animo, che insuperbiva.’ [unsigned] 1881c, 22.

Industrial Ornaments

Thus far this chapter has shadowed *Excelsior* from its premiere in the late nineteenth century to its cinematic refractions in the early twentieth. Skip forward a decade or so and Siegfried Kracauer would publish his famous essay ‘The Mass Ornament’, in which he criticised a cinematic craze for the all-female dancing chorus by singling out the sensation caused by the Tiller Girls: an American dancing troupe whose signature routine consisted of interlocking arms across a single line, with the whole ensemble propelling itself by means of cancaning, scantily-clad legs.⁴⁴ Kracauer notoriously invested the Tiller Girls (and their legs in particular) with epoch-defining significance, claiming they incarnated a recent mutation in capitalist production: their kicks mirrored hands in the factory along Taylorist assembly lines, in which bodily gestures had been atomised into meaningless components of an integrated human–machine interface.⁴⁵ Thus reconstituted into ‘indissoluble girl clusters’, these dancers presented a mass ornament: a mobile geometry that conveyed nothing but its own bewitching organisation.⁴⁶ The mass ornament communicated the law of a productive system in thrall to the interests of capital, which drove mindlessly towards its own accumulation.⁴⁷ Here we might detect the whiff of vintage misogyny, as labouring female bodies came to stand in for a lack of guiding intelligence in human productive forces writ large. Yet the body logics that Kracauer unearthed may deserve renewed attention. Significantly for my purposes, Kracauer looked back to the late nineteenth century for precursors: ‘Ballet likewise used to yield ornaments, which arose in kaleidoscopic fashion.’⁴⁸

The after-image of the kaleidoscope evokes once more the metaphor of serial production noted in *Excelsior*’s initial reception. It hints too at the technological legacies that linger on in the ballet’s endlessly reproduced geometric routines. While Kracauer’s notion of the mass ornament has

⁴⁴ ‘The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls.’ Kracauer 1995, 79.

⁴⁵ An overview of Taylorism, one of the earliest forms of scientific work management, can be found in Banta 1993, 3–35.

⁴⁶ Kracauer 1995, 76.

⁴⁷ ‘Ornament der Masse’ was one of the first essays Kracauer wrote following a period in which he studied Marx’s economic theories intensely; see Thomas Levin’s introduction to Kracauer 1995, 16. Marx based his explanation of capital’s self-serving logics on the distinction between dead (accumulated, past) labour and real, living labour – the latter enslaved to the former; see K. Marx 1993, 459–63. As Kracauer put it: ‘Like the capitalist production process, the mass ornament is an end in itself.’ Kracauer 1998, 78.

⁴⁸ ‘Auch der frühere Ballett ergab Ornamente, die kaleidoskopartig sich regten.’ Kracauer 1927.

itself come in for various critical assaults over the years, I would like to suggest that it can do two things here.⁴⁹ First, it allows us to reposition the ballerina-cum-cyborg, a figure that has become prominent in the history of twentieth-century modernism and the avant-garde. To put it crudely, this dancing automaton emerged from middle-class popular cultures long before celebrated avant-garde works such as Satie's *Parade* (1917). Second, rereading Kracauer encourages us to examine anew *Excelsior's* complex interactions between dance, technological forms and social production. As Christian Sieg has argued, the 'Mass Ornament' essay might best be read now for its 'preconscious logic': one that reproduces choreographically – in a way that is on the verge of emerging into thought and language – an embodied sense of repetitive factory work involving the use of various machines.⁵⁰ This preconscious logic lurks around the cusp of awareness and can be glimpsed through the metonymic relations it produces between diverse elements along a continuous social surface. *Excelsior's* own Milanese superficialities are a case in point: for example, the long, straight street (Via Manzoni) that connected La Scala to the city's Public Gardens, where on any given day between May and November in 1881 a related choreography of manufacture and machines was in progress at the Work Gallery. Throughout this time, *Excelsior* remained a fixture onstage at La Scala, clocking up 100 performances at the opera house by the end of the year: the ballet was a semi-permanent urban landmark, which, like the Exposition itself, provided a form of industrial entertainment for thousands of visitors.⁵¹ Viewed from the trampled surface of Milan's pavements, *Excelsior's* gestures – its music-box effect in particular – come into focus as a motile, musically enhanced extension of a particular urban topography.

When the buzz of the Exposition eventually faded and its makeshift architecture was disassembled, *Excelsior* began its own migrations, which saw it travel well beyond Milan.⁵² Yet a trace of the ballet remained at the heart of the city: it took up quasi-permanent residence at the Teatro Gerolamo, a famous puppet theatre located in the streets behind Piazza del Duomo. *Excelsior's* 1884 premiere in puppet form merited a newspaper review, which claimed that 'The ballet is faithfully reproduced from the

⁴⁹ On changing attitudes towards Kracauer, see Eksteins 1997; see also Hansen 1992.

⁵⁰ Sieg 2010.

⁵¹ On walking and urban psychogeography in Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bruno 1993, 11–23.

⁵² For more information on *Excelsior's* international circulation, see Scholl 2007 and Propokovych, 2008.

beginning to the end,' detailing every one of *Excelsior's* eleven scenes.⁵³ 'Those talented wooden heads ... know how to represent Manzotti's various characters with admirable art, such that it seems, in their movements, in their gestures, that they possess an unusual intelligence', this review judged, noting too that Marengo's music was accurately reproduced.⁵⁴ The anonymous critic leaves to us to guess how those puppets coped with the onset of Marengo's Galop: did wooden arms stretch over wooden heads, double-bluffing the illusion of mechanical-human motion, as puppets pretended to be humans imitating machines?

Excelsior maintained a presence in Milan until the theatre closed in the 1950s, its survival now symbiotically linked to the steady decline of puppetry – a once-celebrated form of mechanical reproduction that had been largely superseded by the mid-twentieth century. At roughly this moment *Excelsior* was picked up in 1952 by film director Alessandro Blasetti, in his potpourri portrait of late nineteenth-century Italy, significantly named *Other Times* (*Altri Tempi*). By now, the ballet had come to represent a curious and unfamiliar past, representing a turning point in its longer reception history.⁵⁵ Between the last mechanical displays of puppet theatre and the stereophonic glamour, a silent transition had taken place: a technical shift in the way *Excelsior's* gestures were transmitted. This transition meant the estrangement of the mass ornament, marking the end of a time when the reproduction of gesture could smoothly connect to the gesture of production.

⁵³ 'Il ballo è fedelmente riprodotto dal principio alla fine.' This *Perserveranza* review has been cited in Monti Colla n.d. The puppet version of *Excelsior* was also deemed worthy of mention among the theatrical notices in *Il mondo artistico* (9 March 1884), 2.

⁵⁴ 'quelle brave teste di legno ... sanno rappresentare con arte mirabile i diversi personaggi manzottiani, così da parere, nelle loro mosse, nei loro gesti d'averne una non comune intelligenza'. For more on the Teatro Gerolamo see Leydi and Mezzanotte Leydi 1958, 235–80. On musical ensembles typical of the Teatro Gerolamo, see Dotti 2003.

⁵⁵ When choreographer Filippo Crivelli revived the ballet at La Scala in the 1970s, he would describe the work as a 'perfect mechanism' – timeworn but intact – which could be reanimated in such a way as 'to provoke sensations as near as possible to those *Excelsior* must have produced in 1881' (1974).