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### Wylie and Stafford: Beaux Gestes: A Guide to French Body Talk

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Wylie and Stafford: Beaux Gestes: A Guide to French Body Talk

*Beaux Gestes: A Guide to French Body Talk.* Laurence Wylie and Rick Stafford. Cambridge, MA: The Undergraduate Press, 1977. xiv + 79 pp., photographs. \$8.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by *Ronald C. Rosbottom*  
Ohio State University

This is one of the most useful—and amusing—books I have seen on an aspect of a foreign culture, in this case French “body talk.” The French concept of the *beau geste* reveals a culture which puts as much emphasis on form and style as it does on content: it refers to a beautiful, and therefore good, altruistic deed or action. French literature and film are filled with examples of those who sacrifice all—family, riches, perhaps even reputation—with a *beau geste*. Laurence Wylie, one of the world’s most knowledgeable scholars of French manners and customs (his *Village in the Vaucluse* is a text much admired by humanists and social scientists), has compiled a respectful, yet witty series of gestures (a term I prefer to “body talk”) derived from his familiarity with French culture, and he has published them (with the help of the collection’s photographer, Rick Stafford) under a tongue-in-cheek title which only tentatively undermines the seriousness of the enterprise.

It is this serious aspect of Wylie’s effort that must not be ignored, no matter how amusing his commentary and exposition. The book’s jacket has a picture of Wylie making the gesture called *le pied de nez*, which “indicates a feeling of defiance, expressing delight in another person’s discomfiture.” The last picture of the book shows the most famous of European gestures—*les bras d’honneur*—called “the shaft” (or, less elegantly, “up yours”) in English. Yet this intentional mockery of his enterprise and his bemused readers should not detract from the fact that Wylie knows that to *speak* a foreign language is only the first of several steps toward total expressivity in a foreign culture. I do not exaggerate when I submit that every instructor of beginning, intermediate, and advanced French should provide his or her students with a copy of this book. It is only after reading Wylie’s deceptively simple commentary and seeing these telling photographs that one realizes that a very important dimension of language instruction is scarcely available to American students. I wonder, too, if some of the inveterate opposition on the part of our students to language learning in general could not be undermined if we made our course “live” through teaching such “body language” along with the past subjunctive and irregular verbs.

Wylie’s introduction begins: “Words are so essential in conversation that we exaggerate their importance and overlook other signals” (p. vii). He does not offer any new theories on the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication, nor does he cite the scholars who have done work on this connection. However, it is obvious from his remarks that he is aware of the traditions and assumptions of non-

verbal communication. He warns his readers that the incorrect gesture can be just as inappropriate as the incorrect word; the book and its photographs, in other words, should be used with caution. The seriousness of his enterprise is brought to our attention when Wylie explains that he honed his skills at gesturing (all the photographs, by the way, are of Wylie, dressed simply in a dark turtleneck against a gray or black background, without props of any kind) at the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris for *Mime-Mouvement-Théâtre*, where he “spent the year 1972–1973 studying cultural differences in body movement and non-verbal communication” (p. ix).

There are only nineteen pages of text; the remainder of the book is taken up with about eighty photographs. These photographs, all graphic but not exaggerated, are divided into eight thematic groups ranging from “Boredom, Indecision, and Rejection (*Le Jemenfoutisme*)” through “Sex (Sex)” to “Threat and Mayhem (*Fais Gaffe*).” Wylie is not timid about using those expressions that make explicit reference to sexual and other biological impulses. My favorite among these latter (and one which shows how a concept can mean one thing in one culture and something else entirely in another) is the explicit *il a du cul* (“he has some ass” [I would be even more explicit here than Wylie!]) to mean not a negative but a positive “he’s really lucky.” Another interesting cultural aspect is what Wylie refers to as *le jemenfoutisme* (derived from the verb “foutre,” which means, in the most gracious sense, “to screw”). Wylie translates it as “Who cares” or “I don’t give a damn,” which obviously is a sentiment we all express from time to time. Wylie’s point, however, is that the attitude is so deeply rooted in France’s collective consciousness that there is “a long list of gestures indicating a rejection of responsibility, the belittling of one’s errors, the affectation of indifference” (p. 23). Obviously a generality, this observation nonetheless pinpoints an attitude that only a series of courses in recent French history and political science would reveal to the student who has not spent more than a couple of weeks in that country.

One more such observation should be cited as an example of the potential that such studies would have for those learning how to live and communicate when in France. In the chapter entitled “Problems and Weaknesses (*Les Petites Misères*),” Wylie observes:

This category, which deals with the petty weaknesses of humanity, could easily be used to analyze the French value system. . . . I do not believe that the French are more rational than other people, but they certainly have the most exaggerated concern for man’s reason. All sorts of hand and finger movements around the top of the head serve to call attention to the malfunctioning of someone’s brain (p. 35).

Such an observation—though, again, obviously superficial—shows how rich a rhetoric of gestures can be for anyone who studies a language with the ultimate goal of understanding a culture. And this is, I believe, the most felicitous message that comes from



Wylie's book, namely, that learning to *speak* French—or Italian or German or Russian—is but a first step to learning the idiosyncrasies which define a culture and which define that culture through the maintenance of differences. I am convinced that the appropriation of Wylie's model would not only make language-learning more fun for American students, but also that it would make language-teaching more successful and, in the end, more pertinent to cultural and ethnic realities.

I enthusiastically commend Professor Wylie and Rick Stafford for having taken the initiative in creating this marvelous book, as well as their publishers for having printed it. I urge the latter to make it available in a paperback format so that it will reach the widest possible audience.

*Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media.* Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. xi + 333 pp. \$3.00 (paper).

Reviewed by *Michael Morgan*  
University of Pennsylvania

Save for some predictably defensive network spokespersons, one would be hard pressed to find disagreement about the presentation of women by the mass media: in a word, it stinks. This book manages to express that contention, in tones ranging from livid through sagacious to silly, far more times than need be counted. Yet, it remains a valuable, usually readable, and even important document of one of the worst media crimes of the century. The crime, the editors tell us superabundantly (and borrowing from Gerbner), is the "symbolic annihilation" of women by television, newspapers, and magazines.

*Hearth and Home* is an exploration and elaboration of this phenomenon and also something called the "reflection hypothesis." Briefly, symbolic annihilation sums up both the underrepresentation of women in media and their trivialization into sex objects, "child-like adornments," passive male adjuncts, and so on. The reflection hypothesis holds that, owing to television's need to attract the largest possible audience and because of its corporate structure, its content reflects dominant social and cultural ideals and values (as opposed to "reality"). According to Gaye Tuchman (p. 17), the result of these two factors is that "the preschool girl, the school girl, the adolescent female, and the woman" learn from TV that

[women] are not important in American society, except *perhaps* within the home. And even within the home, men know best. . . . To be a woman is to have a limited life divorced from the economic productivity of the labor force.

The issues are explored both in qualitative, subjective articles and in studies based on "hard data," with

the former being generally better. This is due in part to a certain redundancy among the latter studies, which are largely content analyses of various media with similar dimensions of analysis. The redundancy is the primary flaw of the book. The same references keep popping up. Virtually every article justifies its concern with media portrayal of women by reminding us that over half of the population and more than 40 percent of the labor force are females. It may be even more important to note that those statistics need not be the paramount legitimization for the authors' concerns.

The economic dysfunctions potentially arising from discouraging women from working (and teaching them to "direct their hearts to hearth and home") may be rivaled by the interpersonal implications. These may extend to basic ways in which females relate to females, males to males, and each to the other, both within and outside of a family context. When men's expectations of women are based on notions deriving from typical media representations, it is not only women who are being hurt.

The first three parts of the book are titled "Television," "Women's Magazines," and "Newspapers and Their Women's Pages." A fourth is "Television's Effect on Children and Youth." Let's look at the picture the book cumulatively reveals.

Following Gaye Tuchman's introduction, George Gerbner opens the section on television by noting the "undercutting" of women and their excessive victimization on television. He claims that the media image serves to obstruct social change—a "counterattack" on, rather than a "reflection" of, the goals of the women's movement. Judith Lemon finds men "dominating" women in far more television interactions than the reverse, particularly in crime dramas. Stephen Scheutz and Joyce Sprafkin examine commercials on children's shows, and not surprisingly conclude that more men than women appear in them. Ads promoting products feature males, while females more often appear on public service announcements. Finally, Muriel Cantor shows that, although the nature of the stereotyping is different, even on public broadcasting "women are not represented as integral to American life" (p. 86).

The section on women's magazines points to a slightly different but unambiguous message: "women should strive to please others." It begins with a very nicely written article by Marjorie Ferguson, who extracts this message by dissecting the "imagery and ideology" of the covers of several popular British women's magazines. E. Barbara Phillips sees it in both *Ms.* and *Family Circle*, concluding that while *Ms.* is "liberal, not liberated," neither is it "just another member of the *Family Circle*." Carol Lopate's innovative contribution looks at the coverage of Jackie Onassis in twelve different women's magazines, and indirectly but convincingly reaches the same general conclusion.

The section on newspapers is not as tightly organized as the first two. Its chapters are a curious