

Dancing With Hitler: Examining the Movements of the Nazi Movement and Geopolitics of Dance

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Introduction

Guten Tag. Hello! Shaking hands. Exchanging a friendly smile. Blushing. Pointing. High five. Wink. Fist pump. Wave. Hug. Kisses on the cheek. Maybe even kisses on the lips. Gestures and greetings are all around us. When we greet someone, our body language directs attention to that person. In this sense, a greeting is “an initial and symbolic gift to the person to whom it is addressed.”¹ But what happens when that greeting is manipulated by the political powers that be to create conformity, and obedience to the government? Can something as common to everyday life as how we greet one another have the power to manipulate the masses? The infamous outstretched arm, Hitler salute gesture, of Nazi Germany, is an exceptional example of the strength of physical movement in enhancing a political movement. The Hitler salute has often been recognized as the most obvious gesture that symbolizes Nazism. It was a movement that visibly converted an anonymous mass of people into a blind community of followers under the swastika.

The context through which gesture is created, performed, and viewed, plays an important role in how that particular signal is perceived. Therefore, the way in which I am writing this paper, and in choosing *this* specific topic to explore is shaped by who I am and where I am in the world. My context shapes how I write. Your context determines how you interpret information and what information you perceive as important. It is critical to study the Hitler salute within the context of Nazi Germany and in the context of greetings in general. Social practices mediate human interactions. In this manner, we can then “begin to understand [the Hitler salute] as not

¹ Allert, T. (2008). *The Hitler salute: on the meaning of a gesture*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 3.

only a product of those dark times but as a contributor to them.”² This paper is only a section of a much larger study on the geopolitics of dance in Nazi Germany. The combination of physical location and the politics of the time period are essential to understanding how movement and dance in Germany had a mutual relationship with the politics of National Socialism. Through analysis of the Hitler salute and its effects on humanity, I plan to discuss how Hitler utilized this gesture to choreograph the masses. In a dance, there is usually a relationship between dancers and a connection between the movements executed by their bodies. In this way, the Hitler salute enabled Germany to dance with Hitler.

When introducing the idea of dancing with Hitler, at first glance, it seems almost inappropriate to be trivializing the gesture of the outstretched arm as dance—especially when the larger context of Germany under Hitler’s control is an absolutely dark and devastating history. The human loss of life, whether it be through war, in a concentration camp, or the loss of human individuality and a willingness to turn a blind eye to atrocities taking place all around, is absolutely shattering. However, when examining German policies between the years of 1930 and 1945, it becomes eminent that this movement, or dance, was intentional, and central to the politics that shaped National Socialism. Hitler and his followers knew the power of movement and this gesture was so deeply engrained into the daily actions of Germans that it began to symbolize much more than loyalty to the Fatherland—it became a symbol of national submission.

Gesture Through Geopolitics

The term geopolitics is a much more complex than it sounds. For the purposes of this research, I am defining it as the grouping of physical location (geography) and the particular

² *ibid.*, 11.

happenings and laws in that area (politics). The origins of this term, and the controversial field of study it describes, go back to a German trend that had been rumored to be linked to Nazi National Socialism. Professor-General Karl Haushofer, who had his starts in the Army and sometimes referred to as “the man behind Hitler,”³ coined this “new science of power politics” and changed the way an entire generation thought about the social consciousness of the German state. The term, as it was used in Germany, came to be in the period between World War I and World War II. “Born of German defeat, the new science was meant to be no mere academic discipline but a workshop for tools of revenge.”⁴ In this way, many people viewed Haushofer’s geopolitical ideas as fuel for Hitler’s fire. The issue of whether or not Hitler was truly inspired by Haushofer’s talk of geopolitics is multifaceted and will be saved for another time. However, it is worth noting the interesting use of a contemporary lens of geopolitics to study gesture in Nazi Germany, because it is a term whose origins are so tightly aligned with the time period being studied.

Like the term geopolitics, the idea of gesture politics is also deeply rooted into German history. The Nazi dictatorship was highly concerned with creating the illusion of mass support and enthusiasm for the government. However, gesture in the Third Reich “went way beyond ceremony and ritual, penetrating every area of life and everyday encounters.”⁵ Something as integral to daily life, such as a greeting, was turned upside down by Nazism. The Hitler salute, “took a normal social situation and imbued it with the threat of sanction and punishment...it was a ghostly spectacle [which] invested every human encounter with magical fascination and helped

³ Fashions in Space, 276.

⁴ Ibid., 281.

⁵ Mary Fulbrook. “Embodying the Self: Gestures and Dictatorship in Twentieth-Century Germany.” *The Politics of Gesture* (2009): 263.

to silence a nation's moral scruples.”⁶ Those who did not participate in this national greeting were deemed traitors and severely punished.

History of Gesture in Germany

Up until the point of Hitler's takeover, German greetings were different in all areas of the country. Before Nazism, there was no such thing as *The German Greeting*. Instead, greetings were often “regional, and their use tend[ed] to be restricted to particular generations or occupations, social microcosms whose members reaffirm[ed] their common bond and shared affiliation by greeting one another in specific and formulaic ways.”⁷ How people utilized their body language through greeting told more of their social status and geographical community than their political alliances. With Hitler in power though, his salute made it possible to unify all of Germany under one, impersonal, militaristic, motion. He took a disembodied nation, devastated by defeat and economic hardship, and unified the people under one gesture. “It offered a seemingly direct and uncomplicated way to establish contact, putting an end to elaborate rules of etiquette and neutralizing the class pretensions that could darken any encounter with the shadow social inequality.”⁸ The people of Germany were in the perfect situation for Hitler's movement manipulation. However, despite the unifying component of this gesture, it was also quite decisive in making a divide. The salute revealed two groups within Germany—“those who gave orders and those who obeyed them—heighten[ing] in civilian encounters the threat inherent in any human interchange.”⁹ Only these two groupings existed because *not obeying* was simply *not an option*. Through this gesture, Hitler created a physical motion of what

⁶ Tillman Allert. (2008). *The Hitler salute: on the meaning of a gesture*. New York: Metropolitan, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

it meant to be German—and it infiltrated all areas of German life promoting loyalty to the Fuhrer.

Analysis of The Hitler Salute: The Strength of Movement

In addition to becoming a symbol of national obedience, the physicality of this movement was also quite telling of German political and militaristic ideals. Unlike most greetings, which normally open up the possibility of communication, the Hitler salute was rigid and tense throughout the entire body. Concentration and solemnity were critical elements as well.¹⁰ The outstretched arm created an inflexible barrier between two people and ultimately established a distance upon encounter—the exact opposite of the traditional purpose of a greeting. In the Hitler salute, the arm was not extended directly towards the person being greeted. Palm open, arm erect, this motion extended beyond the person being greeted, as if upward to a higher being. Germans had open hands, but never made physical contact. The physicality of this idea mirrors the intensity of uncertainty common to the time period. Even though this was intended to be a unifying gesture, and ultimately it did unify people under National Socialism, the Hitler salute is also a prime example of the barriers that were put up between people. Citizens who were once friends dropped associations with one another to avoid being complicated in their affairs. The people of Germany found themselves living in isolation of one another in fear of being criminally associated with someone else. The Hitler salute is a physical representation of this idea.

The salute was only half of this famous German greeting. Like in dance, this movement was also complimented by sound. The ominous phrase, “Heil Hitler” combined with the salute

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

made for the ultimate example of obedience to Hitler. With the words “Heil Hitler,” either two things can be interpreted. One, the greeter is wishing Hitler good health or calling about Hitler’s great authority to *bring the recipient* good health. The phrase could also be interpreted to mean that Hitler is entering the exchange as higher third party. In other words, “Heil Hitler” could be understood as “May Hitler offer our encounter his blessing, his protection and his wish that we both emerge unscathed.”¹¹ In either situation, Hitler set himself to be deemed God-like and capable of having a higher power of wishing well upon the people of Germany. All of these meticulous details built into the fabric of Nazi culture were intentional. Hitler was choreographing his Nazi movement throughout Germany.

Conclusion

In dance training, it is common to discipline to body to perform. Tendu, tendu, plié, plié. Repeat. That was what Hitler was doing through his salute—conditioning the human body to conform. In this analysis it is also important to note the difference between representation of the gesture and a full embodiment of it. Just because it looked like the masses were saluting in harmony, was everyone really embodying it? Or were they just doing it because they had to in order to survive? People accepted the new greeting for various reasons. It is difficult to place judgment on why; however, we must continue to examine *how* choreographing the masses under a single gesture occurred. How did this practice become routine and dance-like? This arm motion became a new principal of political sociability and a staging of values.

The impact of this eminent movement on the success of the Nazi movement brings up the question of whether or not the Hitler salute can even be considered a greeting? Instead of addressing the recipient of the salute, it created a barrier. Instead of welcoming communication,

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

it offered praise to the God-like Hitler. The Hitler salute “fused with the structural principles of the greeting, turned it into a loyalty oath and membership badge, and thus utterly distorted its normal function as a gesture of mutual acknowledgment and reciprocal commitment.”¹² By implementing the Hitler salute into the muscle memory of Germans, the true connection between dance and politics literally became captured within the human body. The Hitler salute was not only a symbol of blind conformity, but it was the essence of how a physical movement developed one of the most atrocious political movements known to history.

¹² Ibid., 97.

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