

# CID-CONFERENCE

Titus Jacquignon, december 2d 2023

## Marcel Jousse : an anthropology of expression

### Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank Constantin Kontogiannis for inviting me to participate in the CID program, *Dance and Spirituality*, by presenting the anthropology of expression by Marcel Jousse.

Marcel Jousse and his method are relatively unknown, even within the university community. In the dance world, this approach is almost unknown; only the theatre community was able to have access to the anthropology of gesture thanks to the books and teachings of Jacques Lecoq, who set a precedent.

I will therefore keep it simple, as today's conference can be considered both as an initiation, a discovery and an encounter.

I will present Marcel Jousse and the main points of his anthropology; I will try to weave the first links in the direction of dance and spirituality, or even with the problem of dances threatened with disappearance.

### Marcel Jousse

He fell into oblivion almost immediately after his death in 1961. The fact that Jousse wrote very little largely explains this problem. In France, it is good to be a writer; more generally, the human sciences also participate in the literary space. Fortunately, Jousse's classes were all steno-typed "live"; today they represent the fundamental source for any study of the anthropology of gesture.

Marcel Jousse taught for almost 30 years in Paris, at the Sorbonne, at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and at the Paris School of Anthropology. He was a priest, a Jesuit – a scholar-priest, like his friend Teilhard de Chardin who is very famous, but also like many other Jesuits at that time. We are in a period marked by the beginnings of Secularism (1905) and everything religious is mistreated in France; the scientific method applied to religious phenomena will also contribute to the destabilization of faith, or beliefs of the near past.

In this context, the Jesuit company undertook a strategy of reconquest not so much spiritual as intellectual and it encouraged its members to become scientists. Marcel Jousse completely embraces this project and, in 1913, he asks to join the company - he is already a priest - and he presents his project which is the study of the foundations of human expression, but also the possibility of taking up numerous historical, linguistic, ethnological problems, etc., based on multimodal human expression – that is to say that for Jousse, **human expression is originally bodily, manual and oral** (drawing, then writing being later phenomena). This anthropology of expression became known as **the anthropology of gesture and rhythm**.

Marcel Jousse, in his teachings, does not deal directly with dance (we will see that this word, moreover, poses a problem for him, but must also question us); Likewise, we will have to agree on what we put in the word “spirituality”.

Jousse comes from a peasant background in Sarthe, in central France. He speaks Sarthois, he knew the popular and religious practices of the countryside. Jousse saw his mother tongue and his culture die out with him. He lived in the USA with the Indians of the Plains and he was also confronted with the disappearance of languages, cultures and, let's say, the "spiritualities" carried by these cultures. This awareness very strongly marks the anthropology of the gesture: Jousse tries to save what can be saved by developing a method which would allow the Moderns to study and above all to understand all these threatened and, at the time, colonized environments. .

Its issue is therefore not specifically dance, but the relationship to the body, to the gestures and rhythms of the environments studied; Jousse wants to develop a science of behavior in their differences and in their cultural and religious roots in relation to their landscapes, with “the surrounding nature” if we prefer this term – a nature completely integrated into the culture.

With Jousse and, now, with the anthropology of gesture, no body-mind division, but no division between nature and culture either. Jousse is a unicist: there are only interactions, actions and reactions between humans, between humans and non-humans too (with no clear delimitation between these two universes). The rest: the body, the mind and the soul, nature and culture, these are, for Jousse, metaphysical approaches which do not allow scientific work. These are also concepts marked by Christian anthropology, which is not universal; we must therefore study other anthropologies: the diversity of worlds and behaviors.

So, concerning this first point , we can keep in mind that Jousse's anthropology of expression was developed in a certain context and in the face of specific problems, some of which remain today and some of them more particularly concern our current program: the ongoing disappearance of a kind of bodily, gestural, rhythmic and oral heritage that we could try to support in this historical ordeal and, with regard to its “spiritual” dimension, that it is not separable, nor really to be distinguished, from culture, from the living environment: it is necessary to study multimodal human expression and the diversity of behavior in order to shed light on the subjects that brings us together at this moment.

## The anthropology of expression of Marcel Jousse

This method has several entries depending on the public concerned which, at the time of Marcel Jousse, could be composed of doctors, historians, ethnologists, etc. But it is also and above all a method which aims to help form the *Anthropos* – the human, the human compound, according to Jousse’s expression – whatever it may be. It is about the development of oneself in the face of things, that is to say the interactions with which we are in contact. It is undoubtedly this aspect of the anthropology of gesture that can best speak to the artists, because it is a form of **anthropology of inspiration and creativity**. But, once again, it is depending on the audience, Jousse targeted, and so did I. I am taking an axis and presenting a part of a whole.

The starting point of Jousse's anthropology is the problem of knowledge: "How does the *anthropos*, placed in the middle of the interactions of the ambient environment, manage to take into itself the information coming from the cosmos, to preserve it, to express it and transmit it or have it transmitted over generations. »

I clarify the vocabulary: Jousse speaks of *anthropos* to mean the human, and of *cosmos* to mean the lived and experienced environment. There is therefore as much *cosmoi* as situations experienced by an individual or a group, in a given time and place. In this moment, through our meeting, even with the Zoom tool which brings us closer while emphasizing the distance that separates us, we form a *cosmos*, a *micro-cosmos*, and we experience something, each one in a singular way.. There are as many different resonances as there are hearings of my words, because each

*anthropos* present here already carries within itself its own *cosmos* already there – Jousse would say its “*mimism*”, but I will come back to it later –, this cosmos which is the set of traces left inside us by our past experiences, our conscious and unconscious interactions, our reactions and our personal interpretations to these interactions, or our tendencies, our concerns, our current field of research and work, etc. All of this plays out inside us, inside each one of us, and between us. The Jousseian distinction between *anthropos* and *cosmos* should not, therefore, be considered as a boundary. The exterior cosmos is present within the *anthropos* and this intimate relationship creates the cosmos – a sort of interior universe – specific to each person

Experience is therefore the main criterion: the *anthropos* experiences, intimately, its immediate cosmos; the model is the cognition, situated, or embodied, of which Jousse is one of the pioneers. This experience of the interactions of the cosmos leaves a memory trace in the *anthropos* that Jousse calls *mimems*, infinitesimal vibrations which penetrate and work in our organism. This process is unconscious. For this reason, it is almost impossible to study it scientifically because science needs an objective, structurable, measurable, quantifiable phenomenon.

Jousse's strategy will then be to consider this problem of knowledge from the viewpoint of human expression, knowing that this is primarily body, gesture, rhythm, breath, voice and verb, and that at least it is objectifiable: it is an objective approach to the subject of something eminently subjective, personal, intimate.

Therefore, his science, the anthropology of gesture and rhythm, is the means of expression chosen to explore and clarify the problem of anthropological knowledge, that is to say when the *anthropos* tries to know itself, as well as the Other and the universe, only by means of its "natural tools": the senses, breathing, bodily structure, analysis of movement and behavior, the meaning to be given to an action and to a reaction, etc. Thus, the anthropology of expression leads to a science of behavior, since everything will be a question of action and reaction within a set of interactions, some of which can be taken into account by the *anthropos* and used by him. to express oneself and interact again, but this time in consciousness and will.

This approach has an individual aspect: how the singular *anthropos* interacts, acts and reacts within a particular cosmos and here, the question of spontaneity plays, for Jousse, a considerable role.

There is a collective aspect: the development of the social, of the cultural – a collective where the spontaneous nature of the individual reaction is suppressed or pushed aside or taken advantage of by the group and the norm or even the code, in other words the language.

And finally there is the problem of language, precisely, which is a power already well established, which traps the individual in its net and standards or codifies meaning and behavior. This language is generally opposed to expression which is, in Jousseian logic, what springs from *anthropos* – the norm against spontaneity. This problem of language is then also opposed to that of knowledge because any discovery, necessarily original, singular, destabilizing, that an individual would bring to the collective, will find itself confronted with the reigning language which has great difficulty recognizing the unknown. , to accept originality, to make room for the discovery of genius and the new expression that is logically associated with it.

From there results a fight between expression and language in Jousse's anthropology, which translates the tensions or conflicts that Jousse experienced, but which also concern the life of the scholar, that of the artist or that of any *anthropos* who emerge from the beaten track.

For Marcel Jousse, to know is to become aware of the interactions that play within oneself, to bite into the space of the unconscious and take a little information and energy – *mimems* – to reveal them to expression which is thought-gesture-rhythm; an expression which is expressed spontaneously, which passes “outside”, towards the Other, a tiny part of the interactions that the *anthropos* has received inside itself from the cosmos. We capture everything, we keep track of everything, but very few “things” reach consciousness and are used to express themselves.

Awareness is therefore something essential in the Jousse method which defines a *laboratory of awareness*: the laboratory is us and the “matter” which is studied in this laboratory are gestures. We can only become aware of our gestures and the interactions of the universe which we translate into gestures, that is to say into behavior: therefore, we experience interactions which are not all human, far from it – for example: the sun which “gets up (se lève)” and which “lies down (se couche)”, as we say in French – and we translate them into gesture (get up and going to bed, like an *anthropos*), which

means that, for Marcel Jousse, the root of our expression, then of social language if it does not stray too far from anthropo-logical expression, is **metaphor**.

The metaphor is not only a word, the gestural etymology of a word, but also and above all the formula (subject-verb-complement, the agent interacting with an act which is another agent, or an actor if you prefer that term), because all awareness, all knowledge and all expression is about interaction. In “the sun rises”, the sun is not the metaphor: the word is arbitrary like the sun, or o Helios; the metaphor is in the action verb, and the interaction is located in the anthropos which, for millennia, himself rose in relation to the sun, he lived and he worked in relation to the sun, he oriented himself in relation to it, etc., as evidenced in Greek by Hesiod in “the works and the days”.

Anthropos, and therefore culture, has internalized this relationship with the sun and when it was necessary to express this relationship, he expressed the movement of a star as if he was speaking of human behavior. Of course, this is anthropomorphism, and Jousse thinks that it is difficult to escape anthropomorphism since knowledge and expression are gestural, therefore behavioral; only mathematics escapes it, but it is an artificial language unlike human expression which is developed in contact with things, by living them..

## Terminology

Jousse calls *mimism*, this anthropological depth where we receive and preserve all these vibrations coming from the cosmos. This mimism tends “naturally” to express itself because human beings cannot avoid to express themselves. Mimism is a model that answers the question that Jousse asked himself: that of *the expressiveness of the expression*.

Expression is expressing itself, mimism is expressing itself, what we carry within us seeks to come out of us – “IT” is expressed, in this sense, and not “I” express myself. But in fact, I express an expression, or an expressiveness, more intimate, deeper than “I”, but which passes, necessarily, through me. On the other hand, this expression can be blocked, inhibited by “me I”.

There is a game, below “I”, and we cannot identify it. From that point, one of the challenges of the problem of style, for Jousse, is to make “I” available to the *game of mimism* in itself, in order to best express this mimism. This is the issue of spontaneity which is a work of inner flexibility, but also, often, an effort to resist to the social environment which does not want it, knowing that we have internalized this social language which blocks us, holds us back, prevents us from being OneSelf – and being OneSelf is when mimism and Self are connected and congruent in expression; at that moment, we can start to talk about style (style is Human, writes Buffon very often cited by Jousse).

When Jousse talks about what we commonly call the “body”, he is in fact talking about a structure: *the triple bilateralism of the body* – the front-back, right-left, bottom-up and a center - movements animated by the *undulation* of the spine and by rhythms such as our breathing, the rhythm of walking, that of our heart etc., all playing a role in bodily, manual and verbal expression.

Spontaneity, for Jousse, is when our mimism flows into this living and dynamic mold, when the energy-information springs outwards by marrying our complexion. At that moment, anthropos creates a living style because it is anthropological

It is therefore not the body that expresses itself, but the intimate that expresses itself through this dynamic structuring. This is how Jousse points out that oral composers, in traditional environments where they still exist, punctuate and balance their propositions with the body and gestures; they also classify their propositions from right and left, or towards heaven and earth, because their expression is not disembodied. They do not seek to develop a “bodily-manual style” but “it happens” within them, flexibly, because verbal enunciation (when it comes to that) extends mimism, the rhythms of the body and the structure that I have just presented.

This flow of mimism in “ME” and through “I” crystallizes by expressing an original formula. This can be a poetry, a dance, but also a scientific discovery: Jousse often cites examples of scientists who have drawn from a childhood experience, or from an observation that seemed innocuous, the idea which will serve their science. The solution, the formula, or quite simply the right path to follow, was developed inside them first, it worked on the scientist himself before he worked with and on it. Then, he will express a new gesture in an original way: a discovered interaction expressed in gesture, in behavior..

I stop here as regards the presentation of one of the aspects of the anthropology of gesture. But mimism represents the keystone of the Jousse method. I can start to connect with the CID theme.

## **Dance and Spirituality**

There is therefore, in the anthropology of gesture, a distrust concerning language which reigns and standardizes the phenomena, often preventing them from being experienced, or spoiling the experience by giving an a priori interpretation.

Concerning “Dance and Spirituality”, my entry will be terminological: the words we use translate our habits, our way of life – it’s language. This language will determine, most of the time, our approach to a reality, our ability to see, to hear, to feel because we have ready-made formulas inside us - representations we would say today - but Jousse said that we are all “formulated”. It is an obstacle to the recognition and knowledge of oneself and, of course, of the Other. This may be the case in the subject that brings us together.

Marcel Jousse doesn't like dance. He doesn't like music either and he repeats it often. But then, I specify: he does not like what this social, aesthetic, artistic language, generally worldly, often scenic, does inside us, towards what it orients us, what it predisposes us to and, from then, what it makes us incapable of approaching because it is too different from us, from our form of life, from our habits, from our education, from our standards – too different from our social language, and when I speak of language, I always include practices, places, human behavior (but not only human); language is not just about the words and phrases used to speak.

## **Rhythm, aesthetics**

Jousse highlights the following problem: in our modern cultures, we have reduced rhythm to an aesthetic and artistic question, in particular to dance and music, while the phenomenon is universal, like the gesture which cannot be reduced to the visible gesture..

Two examples:

Town planning, architecture, landscaping, are a rhythm: they give rhythm to space. We could also say this about dance, because it is not only a relationship with the body in movement, but with a specific space which is also rhythmic.

In martial arts, another example which has always had a connection with traditional dances, or some more contemporary ones, rhythm is not only good timing, it is also the relationship to the body, to space - the tatami, the ring, the street -, to the movement, to the combat distance.

For this reason, Jousse distrusts our words and dance refers too much to a specialized activity, reduced to aesthetics and the artistic social environment, whereas we could say that almost everything dances – Marcel Jousse said that everything plays, inside us, and that we replay our interpretation of the interactions of the cosmos that we have taken into ourselves. With the anthropology of gesture, play is everywhere.

With dance, in a modern context, we generally have a stage set-up, a time for this – for training, then the performance – and then, precisely, the representation of the bodies on stage (trained bodies, sometimes overtrained), with spectators. Let's say that it has become our way of life and our standards.

But in societies that are still partly traditional, this specialization of space, rhythm, gesture and body does not exist and the part of informality, or spontaneity, is much greater than among us where everything has been partitioned in order to be specialized.

What Marcel Jousse and the anthropology of gesture are trying to do is to shift our gaze – but in fact our whole body: the gaze depends on the head which depends on the body, its positioning and

its movement -, in order to that we are capable of feeling, seeing, hearing, touching (at least with the finger): these other forms of life, which are other ways of conceiving and using the body, the gesture, the rhythm, space, time (when time exists for them and a majority of languages in the world do not have grammatical tense).

We will find, in my opinion, these problems, both for “dance and spirituality” and for “dances in danger” and we will tend to seek, throughout the world, things which already correspond to our practices, to our experiences and our representations (in both senses of the term: the artistic/spiritual, and representation in the scientific sense).

Now, it would be good to let ourselves be surprised, to be able to let ourselves be seized by the unexpected, by the unheard, by the informal, by spontaneity – by everything that does not correspond to our habits, to our standards, to our specialization. We will have to emancipate ourselves from the stage, from representation, from performance, from ritualization, from codification, from scripting.

So, the word “dance” like the word “spirituality” can be an entry, but they can also be an obstacle by restricting our field of vision and experience, or our feelings. The anthropology of gesture and rhythm attaches great importance to experience and feeling; they can represent an opening, as well as a closure.

## Danse et spiritualité

There is therefore, in the anthropology of gesture, a distrust concerning language which reigns and standards the phenomena, often preventing them from being experienced, or spoiling the experience by giving an *a priori* interpretation

The Jousseian warning regarding language can help us in the subject that interests us here: “Dance and spirituality”, it is already a well-marked path and the subject is then less vast than the initial intention which was intended to be open to almost any dance phenomenon, since the term “spirituality” delimits and separates a practice which would have a meaning, let's say “religious”, from a leisure practice, in a club or nightclub, or in the street, a classified practice “leisure” – in other words the sacred and the profane; the sacred being that which takes place inside the temple and the profane, the profane, that which remains outside the temple. This Roman division, which is a form of dualism, is not universal. In addition, it will train program participants to stay on the beaten path, in already known and well-identified landmarks - in current representations.

This is not necessarily a criticism on my part: it is undoubtedly also necessary to deepen what is already known and recognized. But there is this problem of classification between sacred and profane which underlies the formula “dance and spirituality”, which is applied to cultures which do not live from this division. However, if this division does not exist, we will necessarily have dance and “spiritual” phenomena which go beyond the framework of what we generally identify, among us, as a form of liturgy. That is to say that, in daily life, without obligatory reference to a religious framework, there can be “dance” and this can take on, for the actors, a “spiritual” character - or in any case special significance or importance; this can even be the case for leisure dances in modern societies, or even traditional popular dances which in France are pejoratively called “folk dances”..

“Dance and spirituality” is an expression that tries not to say “religious”, but in doing so says nothing other than that – it shouts it while believing it is remaining silent. This is not uninteresting and it could well represent a program of research and experimentation. But then, we have to know where we are going, and thus what we are missing: alongside everything that is not liturgical and institutionalized, generally covered in theological and, often, legal language considering the relationship between law, religion, theology.

However, the anthropology of gesture precisely proposes to be interested in everything which is not formal, in everything which is unexpected, unheard – in everything which goes beyond our representations. In short, to everything that Jousse describes as “spontaneous”, the “spontaneous anthropos”. At that moment, it is not religion which gives meaning to the body in movement, nor another ideology for that matter, but it is mimism: that is to say, that which, from within of oneself, played and pushed a body into movement – a certain rhythmic and meaningful movement.

I remind you that “spiritual” is the Latin *spiritus*, which means breath. To be under the breath, to use the biblical expression, is to be inspired. The Ancients attributed this inspiration to a divinity, hence the word enthusiasm, to be enthusiast - *enthus*; *en... tou theou*: to be under the breath of a god.

You don't have to stick with this ancient religious definition of inspiration; moreover, romanticism, in the 19th century, put inspiration, therefore Breath, in Man, without going through a third party, and this is also what Marcel Jousse does by seeking the anthropological basis of inspiration (and yet, he is a priest). Otherwise, the CID program will be a research program around liturgical dances, only

This type of program, at present, does not pose any major problems; but in the past, there will be almost insurmountable problems due to lack of sources and lack of materiality. It is the same problem that arises for all the gestures, rhythms and words of the past, because the written word, when there is any, was not a simple recording of the gestures and words of the past: the written word is a media that has its own logic, its own strategies, its own objectives.

This difference and this distance between the written word and the reality are also quite interesting to question critically with different viewpoints depending on the periods and environments concerned.

That is a field of research and, for the moment, it is the one indicated by the formula chosen by the CID: "Dance and spirituality". Perhaps "inspired dances" would already be a little broader, but less vast, or less deep, than "dances and spontaneities": everything depends on the distance, or the rapprochement, that we want to make in relation to the religious, to liturgical, which is a specialized field. Do you want to explore, or deepen what already exists and is well mapped? Exploration or deepening are two forms of discovery, equally legitimate and useful, but the same methodological problems will not arise. The anthropology of gesture can help with both approaches, but then it will not be the same orientation of the method.

## **Dances in danger**

What I have just noted is in line with the other concern of the CID that Constantin spoke to me about: dances which are disappearing, like languages in danger – UNESCO has classified 7000 languages in danger with a precision of time in the classification, c i.e. a measure of the timing of the programmed death of languages.

As far as I am concerned, I completely link linguistics and cultural sciences thanks to the unicist approach of the anthropology of gesture. Language, dance, traditional knowledge, knowledge of the natural environment encoded in practices, tales and legends, proverbs, local modes of transmission, or even poetry, "oral literature" - everything is linked and, when we realize that one of them disappears, we just need to take a step back to observe the cultural landscape and we realize, quite logically, that the other members of the culture are also in danger.

So, dance is an entry, and one must carefully choose an entry into a problem; but let's keep in mind the global nature of the problem – Jousse had this formula, imbrication in globalism. All these problems are intertwined.

Here again you will be confronted with the same methodological problems as those I highlighted previously. Dances in the past, in my opinion, are inaccessible: most of the time, there will be no documents.

In the present, on the other hand, there will be many village, community, not to say family, practices. This is what is interesting, but also what complicates research because we cannot survey the world village by village. It will therefore be necessary to proceed by zoning and there, within this delimitation, explore everything, question everything – investigate in a systematic and methodical manner.

This quest for traditional and village dances, which can be more or less codified, or not at all, will not correspond to our standards: no skills required to dance, nor physical condition, nor technicality, nor stage equipment because it's not a show, it's not a performance – otherwise, how could the village participate from 7 to 77 years old, somewhere, in the fields? This is one of the traditional functions of dance. Today, we would say: the transgenerational link. Another quality of these dances is mobility and economy: very few resources required, sometimes none, and you can enter the dance in any everyday space.

It would then be surprising if these dances did not have links with a proverb, a tale, and an element of the landscape. So, we cannot compartmentalize and only pay attention to “dancing bodies”. Jousse’s anthropology teaches, or rather trains, to be receptive and attentive to these interactions..

## **The objective**

The objective of these two projects, partly complementary, must also be clarified. A directory of “spiritual dances”? An atlas of dances in danger? Why not, they are two tools – but why do it?. We want to create them for whom and for what?

Knowing that neither the CID nor UNESCO can revitalize these endangered languages and cultures, because there are problems over which you have no leverage: politics, geopolitical insecurity, the economy, the climate, demography – therefore the rural exodus or even greater migrations which weaken cultural and linguistic ecosystems already strongly disrupted by modernity, including in Europe where, from the 19th century, there has been a kind of conquering and colonial modernity at home

Marcel Jousse has worked extensively on the problem of colonization and that of coloniality: he rightly noted that this was, first of all, a pro domo phenomenon, that the making of modern Man, then modern revolutionary had been, for the peasants of Europe, a colonization on the part of a new model which had to change, right here, the cultures, the traditional forms of life, but also to put aside the dialects and the patois considered incompatible with the progressivism of the time. At the time of colonial empires, this same problem, because it is the same model, was transposed outside.

Thus, with “dance and spirituality” (or another formula), and with “dances in danger”, you will encounter problems which, in any case, will broaden and deepen the initial project and you will interact with other gestures, other rhythms and other reflections than for dance alone; the dance will remain both as an entrance and as a guideline to avoid getting lost in the multiplicity of problems. But dance cannot concern the whole of the strategy

## **Conclusion**

I stop here. I have given, in a way, what represents the center of the anthropology of gesture and rhythm. As a result, you do not possess everything that the anthropology of gesture offers, but you have access to its centrality.

I also simplified, respecting the complexity.

This center could then radiate. I could begin to connect it to the themes of the CID: “dance and spirituality” and “dances in danger”, using the anthropology of gesture approach, that is to say a specific way of raising a new problem, or then find a new way to enter into an old problem and renew it.

As an entry, I chose mainly language issues because, on the one hand, the anthropology of gesture is very little known and, on the other hand, I have neither the skills nor the sufficient experience in the dance to approach the subject in a more practical, or more experimental way. It will rather be up to you, who are dancers, professionals or knowledgeable amateurs, to make the connection between this approach and your experiences, if this approach can give you ideas, if you feel that it can bring you something