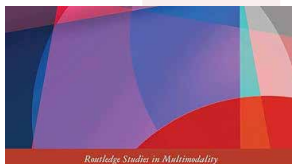


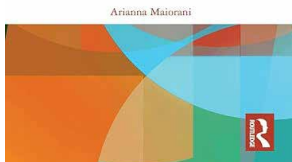
Grammar on pointe: Steps toward a semiotics of choreographed space

punctum.gr

BY: Valeria De Luca



KINESEMIOTICS
MODELLING HOW CHOREOGRAPHED
MOVEMENT MEANS IN SPACE



Arianna Maiorani

Kinesemiotics: Modelling How Choreographed Movement Means in Space

New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 103, € 210 (HBK, ISBN: 978-0-367-27247-0).

Arianna Maiorani's book, published in the Routledge Studies in Multimodality series, sets itself an ambitious task: to found a new interdisciplinary field of research capable of systematically describing how choreographed movement produces meaning. Building on a career that combines professional dance practice with linguistic and multimodal scholarship, Maiorani proposes Kinesemiotics as a socio-semiotic, linguistically grounded alternative to the classical notation systems (Labanotation, Benesh) that have long dominated the archiving and analysis of dance. The book's central claim is that these systems, however sophisticated, capture the mechanics of movement while leaving its meaning-making dimension largely untheorised.

The book is organised in four chapters framed by an introduction and an 'open-ended' conclusion.

Chapter 1 surveys a full century of attempts to think of dance through the lens of language, moving from Laban and Benesh through Adshead, Foster, Bannerman, Hutchinson-Guest and the more recent cognitive-science and kinesthetic-empathy literatures, before situating Kinesemiotics within the socio-semiotic

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 12

Issue: 01

Summer 2026

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2026.0015

Pages: 279-283

Lic.: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

tradition inaugurated by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and developed multimodally by Kress, van Leeuwen and O'Halloran.

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical core of the model: the notions of space as a semi-otic dimension, of motivated movement as projection, and the Functional Grammar of Dance (FGD), an analytical grid that transposes Halliday's metafunctions (experiential, interpersonal, textual) and Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design onto the dancing body. Chapter 3 applies the FGD manually to short ballet excerpts (drawn from *The Sleeping Beauty*), while Chapter 4 reports a collaboration with the English National Ballet aimed at automating movement recognition through motion-capture technology, including an illuminating interview with dancer Junor Souza.

Two aspects of the project merit particular appreciation. The first is Maiorani's ambition to design a genuinely generalizable descriptive apparatus: although the FGD is elaborated and tested on classical ballet, the author repeatedly insists that its categories – projection, choreographic affordance, the move as minimal unit of analysis – are meant to travel beyond this single genre toward other movement-based practices, from ice skating to synchronized swimming to broader forms of embodied performance. This ambition to move from a style-specific notation toward a transferable grammar of movement is precisely the kind of theoretical gesture that a semiotics of dance needs, and it is what makes the book relevant well beyond its immediate corpus. The second real strength of the book is its consistently multimodal orientation. Dance is never treated in isolation: Maiorani insists throughout that the moving body co-articulates meaning with music, lighting, costume and stage design, and chapter 2 closes with a discussion – drawing on van Leeuwen's social semiotics of sound – of how a Kinesemiotic analysis might be integrated with an analysis of the accompanying score. This attention to the constitutive multimodality of dance performance, rather than to movement as an autonomous sign system, is one of the book's most valuable methodological commitments and aligns Kinesemiotics with the best of contemporary discourse-analytic approaches to performance.

These strengths granted, the book also opens several points that would repay further discussion, and that a dialogue with other semiotic traditions could usefully sharpen. A first, properly semiotic issue concerns the distinction Maiorani draws between “physical space,” defined as the volumetric location occupied by bodies, and “cultural” or “contextual” space, understood as the semiotically charged, three-dimensional map onto which projections are directed. This distinction organizes the whole model, from the difference between “training-functional” and “performance-functional” choreography to the concept of instantiation without realization. Yet, once the discussion concerns dancing – and, in the case of ballet, trained – bodies, it becomes difficult to sustain the idea of a physical space that would be semiotically neutral prior to its “contextual” doubling. A trained body is already a

body shaped by a codified technique, by rules of verticality, turnout, weight placement and spatial orientation that are themselves cultural artefacts; the practice space of a ballet class, no less than the stage, is organized according to socially transmitted conventions (the barre, the mirror, the teacher's vantage point, the very geometry of "corners" and "centre" inherited from the Beauchamp-Feuillet system that the book itself discusses in chapter 1). In this sense, physical space is arguably semiotized from the outset, and the stage does not so much add a semiotic layer to an inert physical substratum as intensify and reframe a semioticity that the practicing body already carries with it. Recognizing this would not weaken Maiorani's model; on the contrary, it would allow the useful opposition between instantiation (physical execution) and realization (contextual projection) to be reformulated as a difference of degree and framing within a space that is semiotic throughout, rather than as a difference in kind between a "raw" physical space and a "meaningful" contextual one.

A second point concerns the closely related notion of projection, arguably the book's most productive concept. Maiorani defines projection as the interaction through which body parts move toward meaningful portions of space, and the FGD accordingly maps the possibilities of the head, torso, arms and hands, legs and feet. This is a coherent apparatus for classical ballet, whose technique is built precisely on the articulation of these body parts and their aligned lines. However, if the concept of projection is meant, as the author suggests, to extend to other dance forms, its inventory of engaged bodily resources may need to be considerably widened. Contact improvisation, release-based and somatic practices, or many forms of contemporary and non-Western dance mobilize resources that the current FGD does not accommodate as such: weight and its transfer, breath, gaze and facial engagement, touch and skin contact, qualitative or "effort" parameters (following Laban's own later work on effort-shape) rather than purely directional ones, and the axial, rather than purely peripheral, engagement of the spine and pelvis. A model of projection restricted to the five body parts codified by ballet technique risks smuggling ballet's own somatic hierarchy into what is presented as a general theory of the moving body. Extending the FGD's inventory of "choreographic affordances" to these other resources would strengthen exactly the transdisciplinary ambition the book states for itself.

A third, more properly theoretical, question concerns the communicative status that Kinesemiotics attributes to dance. The model is built, via Halliday's SFL, around a sender-addressee architecture (contextual and co-textual participants, field/tenor/mode, narrative and interactive projections) that presupposes dance discourse as a form of communication comparable, structurally, to verbal exchange. This framework works well for the narrative or quasi-narrative repertoire on which the book's examples are drawn (story ballets such as *The Sleeping Beauty*), where mime, plot and character clearly orient movement toward an addressee. It is less obviously suited to

abstract, plotless or purely formal choreography, where no determinate content is being “communicated” to anyone in particular, and to improvisational and collectively co-created practices, which the book does not address: since the FGD is built on the distinction between training-functional and performance-functional choreography – both presupposing a prior compositional act by a choreographer, subsequently executed by dancers – it is not clear how the model would describe movement whose organization is not pre-designed but emergent in real time. More fundamentally, one may ask whether the meaning of dance is best defined through its communicative efficacy at all. Much of what a dance performance produces – sensation, affect, rhythm, the modulation of presence and tension between bodies – need not be reducible to a message transmitted and received; meaning-making in dance may be as much a matter of sensitive, tensive engagement between bodies and spectators as of discursive projection toward an addressee.

This last remark points to a missed opportunity for dialogue that the book's own theoretical commitments make especially visible. Maiorani situates Kinesemiotics within social semiotics and explicitly invokes van Leeuwen's principle that social semiotics is an open, non-self-contained field that must be immersed in other disciplines to be productive. Yet the volume's semiotic references remain confined to the Anglophone social-semiotic and Systemic Functional Linguistics tradition (Halliday, Kress, van Leeuwen, O'Halloran, Bateman); Peirce and Saussure appear only through the intermediary of dance scholars such as Bannerman, and the Greimassian and post-Greimassian tradition is entirely absent. This is a significant gap. Jacques Fontanille's semiotics of the body and of sensitive, tensive experience, and Eric Landowski's socio-semiotics of interaction regimes (programming, manipulation, adjustment, accident) offer conceptual tools tailored to exactly the phenomena the book gestures toward but does not fully theorize: the affective, corporeal and interactional dimension of dance that exceeds discursive communication narrowly conceived. A cross-fertilisation between Kinesemiotics's multimodal, SFL-based architecture and this Francophone tradition could, for instance, help reformulate “projection” in terms of the tensive body's modulation of presence, or model non-narrative and improvised dance through Landowski's regime of adjustment rather than through a communicative, sender–addressee model borrowed from verbal grammar.

None of these observations diminishes the genuine value of this book as a foundational proposal. Kinesemiotics offers a rare combination of theoretical ambition, methodological rigor and empirical grounding – the collaboration with the English National Ballet being a particularly welcome instance of semiotic theory tested against professional practice – and it will be of clear interest to scholars working at the intersection of multimodality, linguistics and dance and performance studies.

The questions raised here concerning the semioticity of physical space, the scope of bodily resources engaged in projection, the communicative framing of dance meaning, and the absence of dialogue with Francophone corporeal and socio-semiotics, are best read not as objections but as an invitation: they mark precisely the points at which Kinesemiotics, as Maiorani herself describes her conclusion, remains most productively “open-ended,” and at which future research might extend the model's reach.

References

- Fontanille, J. 2004. *Soma et séma: figures du corps*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.
Landowski, E. 2005. Les interactions risquées. *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* 101-103.
Maiorani, A. 2021. *Kinesemiotics: Modelling How Choreographed Movement Means in Space*. New York: Routledge.

AUTHOR

Valeria De Luca Associate Professor of Language
Sciences/Semiotics at the University of Limoges, France.

