

How to recognize a semiotics of dancing?

An Introduction

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BY: Valeria De Luca

Paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze's *À quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?*, one could ask the very same question about the existence and the grasping of a (supposed) semiotics of dancing. Far from being a provocation or a mere gesture, this question is of burning topicality, as attested by the project of this issue and the articles composing it.

I wish first of all to warmly thank Gregory Paschalidis for offering me a wonderful opportunity for scholarly enrichment and dialogue on this widespread, immediate, and “intuitive” subject, which nonetheless remains little explored within semiotics *stricto sensu*. But which semiotics, exactly?

Here, then, the question of identifying *a* – if not *the* – semiotics of dancing returns with renewed force. One could indeed argue that there could be as many semiotics as there are dances – in which case a semiotics of dancing genres or types would need to be established; yet one could just as well advocate the opposite position, according to which what should precisely be sought are criteria, “grammars,” “models” capable of explaining the sense-making process of dances beyond their cultural, historical, social, etc. variability. Indeed, how could there be dance without a (human) body? Would the semiotics of dancing thus be *nothing but* a semiotics of the body? What, then, of the way in which bodies move? This would amount, once again, to shifting the focus from the body to the *gestures* that characterize and shape a movement one can almost “spontaneously” qualify as dance-like. But can one really be certain – except perhaps in the case of highly codified dances, heavily charged with the imaginaries associated with them – of recognizing a dancing movement or gesture in an incontestable manner? Would the elements involved in such recognition be limited to the properly somatic resources of a moving body, or would they extend beyond the skin and the space that this same body creates both by moving and by remaining still?

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Space – scenic, “physical,” architectural, etc. –, clothing – costume or everyday dress –, music – composition or mere “sound” –, but also other agents and motives (*mobiles*) modifying the states and motor possibilities of bodies – substances, environments, the presence of other bodies, engagements, and so on – all constitute levels at which dances can be described while, at the same time, exhibiting entirely different epistemologies of dance. It is in this sense that René Thom (1990) had indirectly posited the dancer's activity as a kind of *meta*-exemplification of every semiotic process, when he asserted that dance is a *semiurgy* and the dancer a *semiurge*.

To this must be added a further element of complexification for a semiotics of dancing that remains to be built. What happens in the absence of bodily flesh as both the support and the “object” of dance? Can one still speak of dance with regard to two-dimensional supports – such as painting – or to “immaterial” traces and images such as those composed by artificial intelligence and, well before it, by software and movement-visualization tools? Or, conversely, would this constitute a merely metaphorical use of the term? And even if this use is metaphorical, would it not reveal something more general and more *generic*, capable of making dance a semiotic object in its own right, transversal to the texture of human bodies?

If, following Deleuze, we seek criteria by which to *recognize* a semiotics of dancing, the first would be this: a semiotics of dancing is possible only in the form of a (meta)disciplinary *platypus* (Eco 1997). In other words, the semiotics of dancing – more than other sectoral or domain-specific semiotics, like the semiotics of music or of art – is possible only by recomposing parts drawn from other semiotic branches and epistemologies. A semiotics of dancing is *simultaneously* or according to the aims of this or that analysis, a semiotics of the *body*, of *movement*, of *gesture*, of *space*, of *performance* (cf. De Luca ed. 2020), and a semiotics of *culture*, a *sociosemiotics*, a cognitive semiotics, a semiotics of *art*, of *practices*, of *writing* – to name only the most relevant disciplinary “zones.”

For instance, if one considers the articulations between the *semiotics of dancing* and *cognitive semiotics* – or indeed the cognitive sciences –, the overflow of the former into the latter becomes clearly apparent. Research within the enactivist paradigm (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), as well as certain branches of neuroscience (Hagendoorn 2010), is indeed capable of showing and explaining how the joint action typical of choreographies involving several bodies on stage is organized, how the sensorimotor functioning of improvisation operates, how the stochastic organization of dance space unfolds on the basis of diverse degrees of freedom of action, and so forth. These approaches alone, however, cannot account for the emblemization of a dance form outside its “context,” milieu, or *scene* of origin, as in the case of protest dances or traditional dance forms undergoing *cultural translation* into other semiospheres.

Likewise, were one to erase from this disciplinary picture all the *representations*, *figurations*, *writings*, and *notations* of dance (Pouillaude 2009) that have long been the province of semiotics and art history, one could grasp neither the properly choreographic

expression of dance nor, more profoundly, its status as a sociosemiotic object. It is worth recalling in this regard that the *Feuillet* notation, also known as the *Beauchamp-Feuillet* notation, rather than being merely a notation of the placement of the feet and the basic leg movements of baroque dancers, was fundamentally a notation of the spatial possibilities of the *theatrical space* of the period, which dances actualized. In the same way, certain dance manuals – like those on the tango from the very beginning of the twentieth century (De Luca 2021) – not only contribute to stabilizing and transmitting improvised dances devoid of textual or verbal attestation, but also record the conditions under which the related social practices were exercised. Hence, they involve several regimes of signs and thereby sketch the picture of a form of life in its own right (Fontanille 2015).

This theoretical and methodological patchwork reflecting and encouraging the transversality of dance as an *object* with respect to its possible supports and expressive manifestations, gives rise to a second “criterion,” which stands as an expanded definition of dance for semiotics. The metaphorical or non-metaphorical use of dance can orient the search for a definition that is, as noted above, both generic and transversal. It must therefore be specified whether “metaphorical” is taken to mean the transfer of properties or of procedures of structuring, organizing, and configuring meaningful forms – in which case the usage would be justified – or whether it refers instead to association and correlation with linguistic or symbolic meanings *lato sensu*. While this latter sense constitutes the anthropological substratum of the emergence of dance in a great many human societies, it does not precisely account for this “mobility” among the various supports through which dance manifests itself, including its metaphorical uses aimed at explaining *other* semioses; for instance, the “dance of thought,” typical of the philosophy of dance (Fabbri 2007).

A properly semiotic definition of dance might therefore be the following: *dance occurs whenever it is possible to (re)trace, by means of whatever object-semiotics may be at hand, the gesture and the more or less organized animation of a trace bearing, to a variable degree, information concerning the time, the space, and the “weight” or “consistency” of the object under consideration.*

As Algirdas Julien Greimas (1968) suggested in the famous issue of *Langages* devoted to gestuality, one can discern, in filigree of the definition proposed here, that coalescence and superposition of utterance and enunciation typical of certain non-verbal languages. Without denying the crucial importance of the *in-act* dimension characterizing dance, the spectrum of possibilities opened by the trace and by the gestures that produce it allows one to include all the forms of archiving, translation, annotation, reproduction, and reenactment on which dance feeds in order to continue existing beyond bodies. Similarly, following the model of the *actant-body* (Fontanille 2004, 2011), developed to render the sensible qualities of agents that are not necessarily *human* bodies, animation (cf. to some extent, Katsaridou and Kostopoulou eds. 2024) proves to be a useful category for operating the transition between the specificities of human and non-human bodies, both sharing traits that can be related to forms

and degrees of *materiality*. It is in this sense that the terms “weight,” “consistency,” or even “texture” should be understood, even though certain manifestations of dance verge on immateriality. To animation, however, must be added the organization through which it unfolds in space and time. Whether through a pre-established choreography, more or less fixed – as in the case of classical ballet – or through collective procedures of improvisation, through technical and aesthetic objects or, again, through the sensory modification of the body brought about by various agents, the maintenance of and insistence within movement defies disorder or randomness – even when the latter, as in *postmodern dance* (Banes 1980) –, become principles of compositional organization in dance.

These elements, simple as they may ultimately be, allow one, among other things, to account for the simultaneously motor and visual nature of dance, without reducing the latter to a “mere” *image* (Sonesson 2009). This point proves all the more pertinent when one interrogates the status of “images” derived, more or less directly – with the help of motion sensors and other signal-processing technologies – from movement and elaborated in real time, superposing themselves onto the very act of dancing (deLahunta 2007, Klein and Noeth eds. 2011, Chatenet and De Luca 2014), up to and including the use of AI as a tool for choreographic composition.

To conclude this brief introductory overview of the issue, it should be stressed that the contributions composing it inscribe themselves within this diagonal and transversal approach just outlined, within an extended semiotic perspective, ranging from contributions rooted in highly identifiable traditions and disciplinary branches to others that bring semiotic problematics into dialogue with the findings of contiguous disciplinary fields, notably the cognitive sciences, computer science, dance studies, neuroscience, somatic practices and knowledge, and psychoanalysis. In this sense, it is *the* semiotic that remains the core of the inquiry, even when *semiotics* as such – or one of its branches or methodologies – is not foregrounded.

From these two main epistemological positionings emerge groupings that share either a common orientation with respect to the aims of the texts, or an inscription within similar analytical approaches, or a reflection on a shared theme, or again a joint focus on the transversality of dance's supports. We can accordingly outline “virtual” sections of the issue as follows.

The first two articles address extended semiotic problematics that certain constitutive traits of dance – both as embodied and as rendered through other object-semiotics – reveal by way of ricochet. The first, ‘Ichnography of dance’ by **Lucien Massaert**, confronts head-on the problem of the impossible representation of dance, of the excess of the body that defies the geometrical systems of a rationality (*ratio*) excluding desiring production, and of the inclusion of other hybrid elements, such as the ground and the air, which “animate” the configurational apparatuses of dance. Ichnography, understood as the study of the traces, remains, and debris of the semiosis of the (e)moving body, thus

proves to be a writing that is always *deferred* (*différée*) and probably an-iconographic – the author shows how the mere alteration of a single letter suffices to transform the fate of *iconography* into *ichnography* – a writing of imprints that even the ground cannot retain. In doing so, ichnography simultaneously reanimates the notion of the inscriptional support, conferring upon it a “magmatic” thickness that withdraws from itself.

Sémir Badir’s ‘The aspectuality of space, time, and bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas*,’ approaches Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker’s celebrated piece through the lens of a general theory of aspectuality. The piece is examined across both its live and filmic transpositions. The interweaving of the categories of time, space, and the body allows structural patterns of the choreographic form to be identified, patterns that persist *despite*, as Badir clarifies, “the differences perceived among the variations.” In particular, the aspectual approach is able to disclose a serial procedure adopted by the choreography, one that incorporates the notion of *momentum* (*élan*) as a moving pivot in the relation between observing subject and observed object, thereby proposing a conception of aspect that is at once dynamic and structural.

A second group of texts explores various dance manifestations from the perspective of sociosemiotics, the semiotics of culture, and of practices and forms of life. The different supports, mediatizations, scenarizations, and semiotic regimes to which these dances have recourse likewise reveal the investments and implications of these dances in terms of values, and of political or identity engagements.

Inna Merkoulova and **Tigran Simyan**’s ‘Khachaturian’s ballet *Gayane* as a metaphor of happiness in a semiotic perspective,’ analyzes the semiosphere that the Armenian ballet *Gayane* and its closing piece, the *Sabre Dance*, emblemize as “texts” in the Lotmanian sense of the term. The ballet and its various semiotic manifestations – figurative, objectal, textual, and so on – thus prove capable of “embodying” happiness both as a metaphor and as a cultural and identity category. Dance proves to be the *medium* for this happiness, even as the processes of its intersemiotic translation ensure the persistence of the Armenian encyclopedia’s values.

Edgar Vite and **Jorge Urueña**, for their part, in ‘Videodance as political engagement in Latin America: Intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media,’ dwell on the specificities of videodance as an expressive manifestation of dance and performance in its own right. Within this framework, the interweaving of heterogeneous materials and supports responds not only to the requirements of archiving and preserving the memory of dance, but also, in the Latin American context, becomes emblematic of a political practice. Videodance thus becomes witness to the transformation not only of gestures but of social and cultural identities.

In a similar vein, **Michele Denticò**, in ‘Beyond the music: Dancing (with) techno,’ studies the way in which hybrid collectives – human and non-human – are constituted on the dancefloor of techno clubs. The consumption of substances altering bodily, sensory, perceptual, and emotional capacities, and consequently these substances and

techno music themselves, prove to be (non-human) agents that structurally and profoundly modify the recognition of this practice as dance. Employing an ethnosemiotic approach, Denticò exhibits the levels at which these arrangements are organized, defying the discursive configurations of ultraliberal bodies.

On another scale, certain performances can thematize even more explicitly the socio-political engagement of dance. In 'Performing masculinity: A Fontanilleian semiotic reading of Dimitris Papaioannou's 2,' **Daphne Mourelou** follows the stratification of levels of semiotic relevance elaborated by Jacques Fontanille. This choice allows her to connect the level of bodily action on stage to other investments in terms of values, supports, and forms of manifestation that organize and transform the semiosphere of masculinity, its norms, and the representations of the male body.

Other, less spectacular forms of dance can likewise contribute to the development of new sensibilities and new forms of being-together. The ethnographic fieldwork conducted by **Sonia Nikitin** traces precisely the processes of sense-making within forms of shared creation in contemporary dance. In 'Developing body literacies in/through shared creation processes in contemporary dance,' she highlights the role of improvisation and of bodily routines/habits in a collective and embodied learning process, in the sense given by cognitive science, one that joins the regimes of interaction of Éric Landowski's sociosemiotics.

The invocation of enactivist theories of cognition and attention to the processes and procedures of choreographic co-creation lie at the heart of the last group of texts, in which the interdisciplinary dimension is more strongly present. **Alessandra Randazzo's** 'Sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation,' thematizes still more explicitly the aesthetic, choreographic, semiotic, and cognitive role of improvisation in dance. The phenomenological approach meets the semiotics of dance and cognitive semiotics, allowing a fine-grained distinction to be drawn between *sense-making* and *meaning-making*, one that dance improvisation brings sharply into relief. Improvisation thus proves to be a complex, autopoietic process that organizes successive feedback loops.

Positioned between (cognitive) semiotics and enactivist theories, **Giampiero Galimberti's** 'Improvisation in dance and embodied cognition: An enactive semiotic perspective on thermoception' focuses on thermoception, a relatively new element in research on dance improvisation. In the specific case of training in the *Gaga* movement technique, thermoception proves to be a semiosis in its own right, one that participates in the construction of the meaning of movement. Within this framework, the analysis of the *Gaga* method shows that thermoceptive semiosis is not the exclusive province of a single body but can be inscribed within a shared perceptual and interactional field.

The consideration of sensibility and emotion long predates modern and contemporary dance. On this subject, **Sergei Kruk**, in 'Dance, body and emotions: Discussing Ballet Reform in 1600–1780,' identifies the co-presence of two different paradigms, one "rational" and "cognitive," the other "visceral" and "perceptive," that constituted the

substratum of the development of ballet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The neuroscientific perspective brings a necessary historical precision to this nascent semiosis of ballet, even as the latter leaves open the meaning of “action” within the syntagm *ballet d’action*.

Extending these reflections, the issue’s two final articles address an emerging field of research on the articulation between dance and technology, namely, choreographic composition assisted by and with artificial intelligence. **Nicolas Chiappucci**, in ‘Computational choreographies: Dance gesture between semiotic transduction and Artificial Intelligence,’ first retraces the history of the articulations between dance and technology before turning to the various processes of translation – more precisely, of *transduction* – between dance and computational systems designed to support creativity and interaction, namely: (i) the algorithmic reconstruction of dance, (ii) the transduction of music into dance, and (iii) the transduction of natural language into dance. It follows that the use of various technologies, though unable to restore the lived experience of the moving body, operates at different levels of choreographic composition, going beyond a mere geometrization of dance.

Finally, **Silvana Pani**, in ‘Co-choreographing with AI: Novelty, intelligence, and skill,’ focuses on how the cognitive processes in AI-assisted choreographic composition allow for the emergence of new choreographic materials. Despite the numerous ontological differences between dance and artificial intelligence, Pani shows what choreographic composition and AI share in a process of co-creation. Indeed, neither the one – notably in the case of contemporary dance – nor the other is the product of a single, unique intelligence, such that assisted creation calls simultaneously upon a multiplicity of resources, both human and non-human. Yet, owing to the constitutive differences between these two domains, the issue of translation returns with renewed force as an element contributing to the development of co-choreography as a genuine cognitive, semiotic, and practical competence.

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AUTHOR

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

