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Semiotics of Dancing

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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

How to recognize a semiotics of dancing? An Introduction 5
Valeria **De Luca**

Ichnography of dance 13
Lucien **Massaert**

The aspectuality of space, time, and bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas* 39
Sémir **Badir**

Khachaturian's ballet *Gayane* as a metaphor of happiness in a semiotic perspective 57
Inna **Merkoulova** and Tigran **Simyan**

Videodance as political engagement in Latin America: 87
Intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media
Edgar **Vite** and Jorge **Urueña**

Beyond the music: Dancing (with) techno 105
Michele **Dentico**

Performing masculinity: 127
A Fontanillean semiotic reading of Dimitris Papaioannou's 2
Daphne **Mourelou**

Developing body literacies in/through shared creation processes in contemporary dance 151
Sonia **Nikitin**

Sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation 167
Alessandra **Randazzo**

Improvisation in dance and embodied cognition. 189
An enactive semiotic perspective on thermoception
Giulio **Galimberti**

Dance, body, and emotions: Discussing ballet reform in 1600-1780 207
Sergei **Kruk**

Computational choreographies: 235
Dance gesture between semiotic transduction and Artificial Intelligence
Nicolas **Chiappucci**

Co-choreographing with AI: Novelty, intelligence, and skill 257
Silvana **Pani**

REVIEWS

Investigating the sociolinguistics of linguistic landscapes: 273
A discourse perspective
Costas **Canakis**

Grammar on pointe: 279
Steps toward a semiotics of choreographed space
Valeria **De Luca**

Literacy in the age of multimodal argumentation 285
Georgios **Damaskinidis**

Signposts for a renovated urban semiotics 293
Ilias G. **Spyridonidis**

Dark Semiotics 297
Keith M. **Murphy**

COVER PHOTO

Members of the public perform the sequence 'Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter,' otherwise known as the Nelken Line, from Pina Bausch's *Nelken* (1982). Elixir Festival, Sadler's Well Theatre, London, May 6, 2026. Screenshot from the video directed by Anna Vialova, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywSFqVZJm14

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 semiosic 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 emblematization 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

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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 gesturality, 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

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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

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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 Keersmaeker'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*, emblematize 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 Dentico**, 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

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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, Dentico 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 Fontanillean 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

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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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Ichnography of dance

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BY: **Lucien Massaert**

ABSTRACT

Just as François Wahl gave one of his works the title *Introduction au discours du tableau*, we could present this study as an *Introduction to the Semiotics of Dance*, although, to be more careful, we should rather be talking of a possible introduction to a semiotics of dance, starting by asking the question of an (im)possible representation of its space. The obstacles and aporias which this question encounters will lead us to make a detour through the representations of architecture, among others through a drawing by Baldassarre Peruzzi, which single-handedly sums up all the indecisions leading to the acknowledgment of an impossible totalization of the logics of representation. It is the ground of dance, as Valéry perceives it in Degas, which leads us to the necessity of taking into account a dissolution of the figure in the semiotic approach to dance. At this stage a Real presents itself, that which of the body fails to signify, its *objects*, *those* remainders: breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces, that impossible of dance as necessary to knot its structure.

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Structure

1. (Not) representing dance

Just as a sculpture by Henry Moore is built around a hollow which it envelops, and not as an object placed within a landscape, a dancer moves around masses of air which s/he shapes and creates. Dance, just like sculpture in the round, creates its own space (the body on the ground or the body cleaving to the wall would be an equivalent of bas-relief). Thus, René Lew writes that '[t]he movements of the body are a (schematic, or more precisely, drawn) mode of eliciting the body's space just as the space surrounding a letter (the blanks, let us say, mixed with the general white spaces preceding writing in black letters), defines the (black) letter more than the latter is defined

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by its own figurability' (2017:58-59).[1] The dancer is not situated in a pre-established space, a Euclidean space for instance. The body of the dancer sculpts its own moving space, a space being transformed. This way of thinking the space of dance borrows the essentials of its approach from the conception of the place as elaborated by Aristotle.

It will never be stressed enough how much the semiotics of the arts would have gained by acknowledging the significance of François Wahl's book *Introduction au discours du tableau* and the role which the author attributes, throughout his consideration of the work of art, to Benveniste's thinking.[2] No less useful for our consideration is how François Wahl sums up, in a very long footnote in his book, Aristotle's thinking about the place.[3] A short extract from this goes as follows:

> I refer to the investigation (never bettered since) by Aristotle (*Physics IV* [*Books I-IV*, transl. Henri Carteron, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, (1926) 2022], 212 a 9 and 220 b 24-32) on the place (*topos*), occupying the first five chapters of *Physics IV*. It is well-known that in its central part, that of definition, Aristotle, having ruled out that the place could be the form of the body it contains, or its matter, or the interval as independent of the body contained, concludes that it is 'the limit of the enveloping body' (212a, 6), which qua place can only ('wants to') be immobile (212a, 18). Hence finally: 'the immobile immediate limit of the envelope, that is the place' (212a, 20). (1996:49-51)

François Wahl next proposes to consider 'the properties of the place *as structure of the visible*.' He points out that 'as Victor Goldschmidt has shown in an exemplary article about "The Aristotelian theory of the place" (in *Écrits I*, Paris, Vrin 1984), the whole demonstration can only be understood if one poses that the body contained is *mobile* with regard to the limit, which is immobile.' It is not a matter for François Wahl (1996:38-39) of limiting oneself to the opposition, to the dichotomy space/place: 'always, he writes, space works for place, [always] the stasis of a place is indicated for space to overflow it and expose itself.' Wahl refers to a double articulation: 'the one calls for a centered subject and the other for a disseminated subject,' and wonders if representation 'between place and space (limiting ourselves to those two structures) is "constitutable."' In this study, we will endeavor to grasp what aporias engenders this constitution of space, and, more specifically, of the space of dance. We need to take Frédéric Pouillaude seriously, however abrupt his position may seem, and derive its

[1] In this thinking about writing in general and in this predominant role given to the space of the blank, it will be easy to recognize the thinking about Chinese writing and painting.
[2] Ivan Darrault-Harris acknowledges Benveniste's importance in establishing 'the complex links and relationships between Lacan's psychoanalysis […] and post-Greimassian redefinitions of semiotics' (Darrault-Harris 2020).
[3] The terms distributed by me in Figure 1 were borrowed from that note.

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full consequences. We will therefore have to find an alternative approach to the representational illusion, one able to foil its play of simulation.

Céline-Marie Hervé chose as the title of her dissertation *La machine à (dé)représenter pour une théorie systémique de la scénographie* (2018).[4] "(De)representing" is far more indicative than "not representing," since it is a matter of subtracting or being subtracted from representation. Between place and space, between physical-technical space and topology, 'the unsurpassable alternation,' as François Wahl writes, obliges us to necessarily ask ourselves about the limits of representation, and if not about its impossibility, at least about its splitting-up. Introducing his impressive work *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique. Étude sur la notion d'œuvre en danse*, Frédéric Pouillaude presents it 'as the mere explanation of its failure,' for indeed '[it] is always another space that dance seems to fall under'; hence, the acknowledgement of an "impossibility" of thinking its object (2009:9). We are therefore confronted, from the very inception of our thinking, with the necessity of circumventing an obstacle, an impossibility, an aporia.

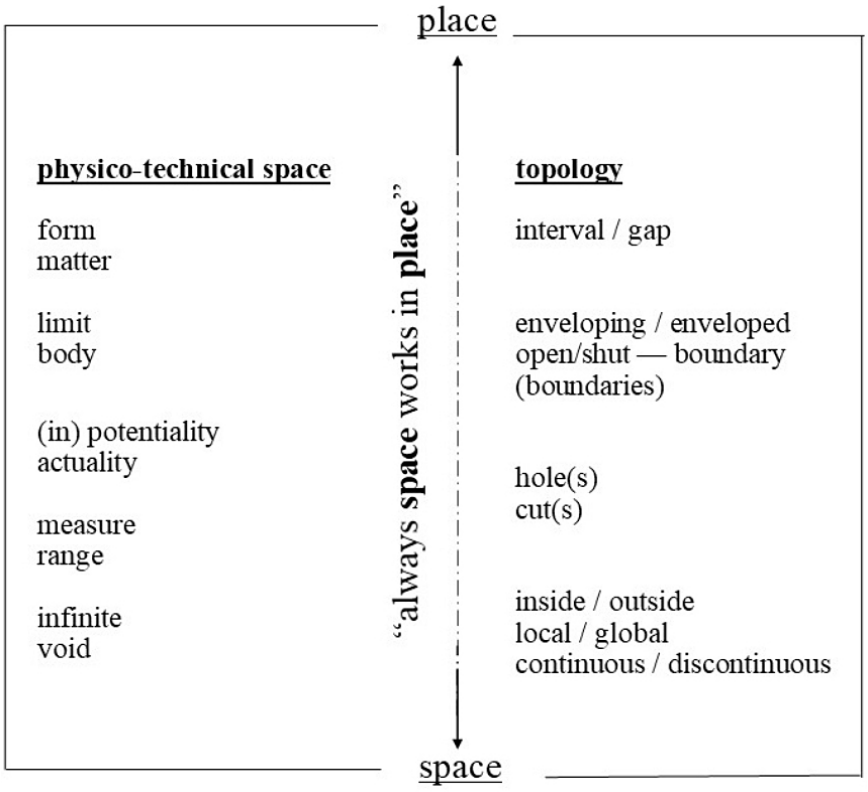


Figure 1. After François Wahl, linkage of space and place.[5]

[4] It is also possible to refer to her thesis as adapted for publication. Though it no longer appears in the title, the author uses this concept of (de)representation in the third part of her work (Hervé 2024:203-252).
[5] We should also refer here to a crucial text by René Lavendhomme (1997).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

The above table (Fig. 1) was drawn in accordance with the one devised by Pierre Boudon, which we reproduce below (see Fig. 9). It is possible to connect our column "physical-technical space" with his column "perspective," and our column "topology" with his column "geometral," though without identifying them. This leads us to question a number of commonplaces by confronting us with the fact of considering the perspective formatting of our usual conception of space as a subjective ("subject-centered") conception, and of thinking the geometral, as well as topology, as objective ("disseminated subject").[6] Following in this Yve-Alain Bois, we shall see how architectural representation, and thus all representation, finds itself torn between ground plan, perspective and axonometry.

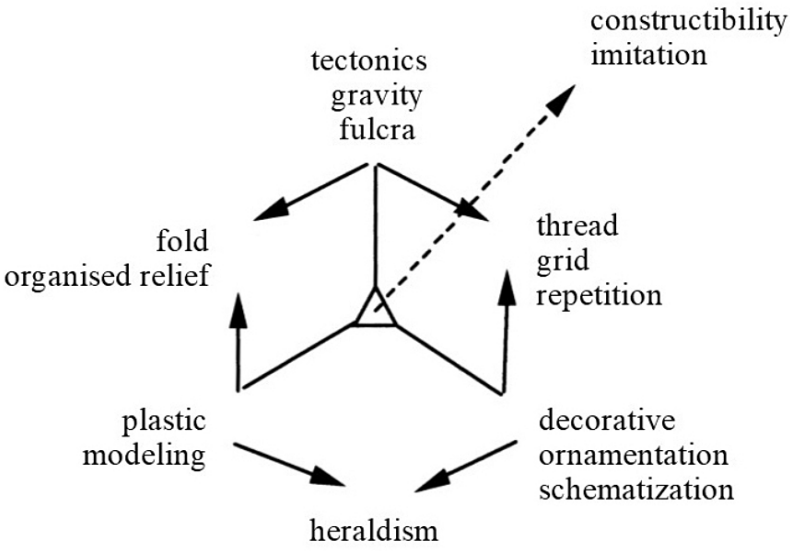


Figure 2. After Pierre Boudon, *templum* of representation (1992:47).

Let us draw from the outset, with this *templum* of representation (Fig. 2), borrowed from Pierre Boudon, the frame of the project for a thinking of ichnography that will follow, which will take a long detour through Yve-Alain Bois's work on architectural representation, from which Boudon himself drew much of his inspiration. This *templum*, writes the author, proposes a 'principle of connection between diverse conceptions of the notion of representation' (1992:44). The "plastic" should be understood here as a volume "in the round." These terms, as Pierre Boudon also writes, 'are principles fashioning esthetic form.' Under "heraldism," Pierre Boudon (1992:45, 47 and 48) understands, for instance, the schematism of Villard de Honnecourt's drawings. We should

[6] We should note that considering the topological as objective and associating objectivity with the disseminated subject in themselves amount to quite a "Copernican" revolution.

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also note here, to the left of this *templum*, a more topological aspect, with the terms "fold" and "plasticity" and more metrical characteristics on the left, with the terms "grid" and "schematization." If dance, as we indicated at the onset, can come close to sculpture in the round, it would, if we follow this distribution proposed by Pierre Boudon, come under a topological conception, and not the metric approach which Villard de Honnecourt's drawings belong to.

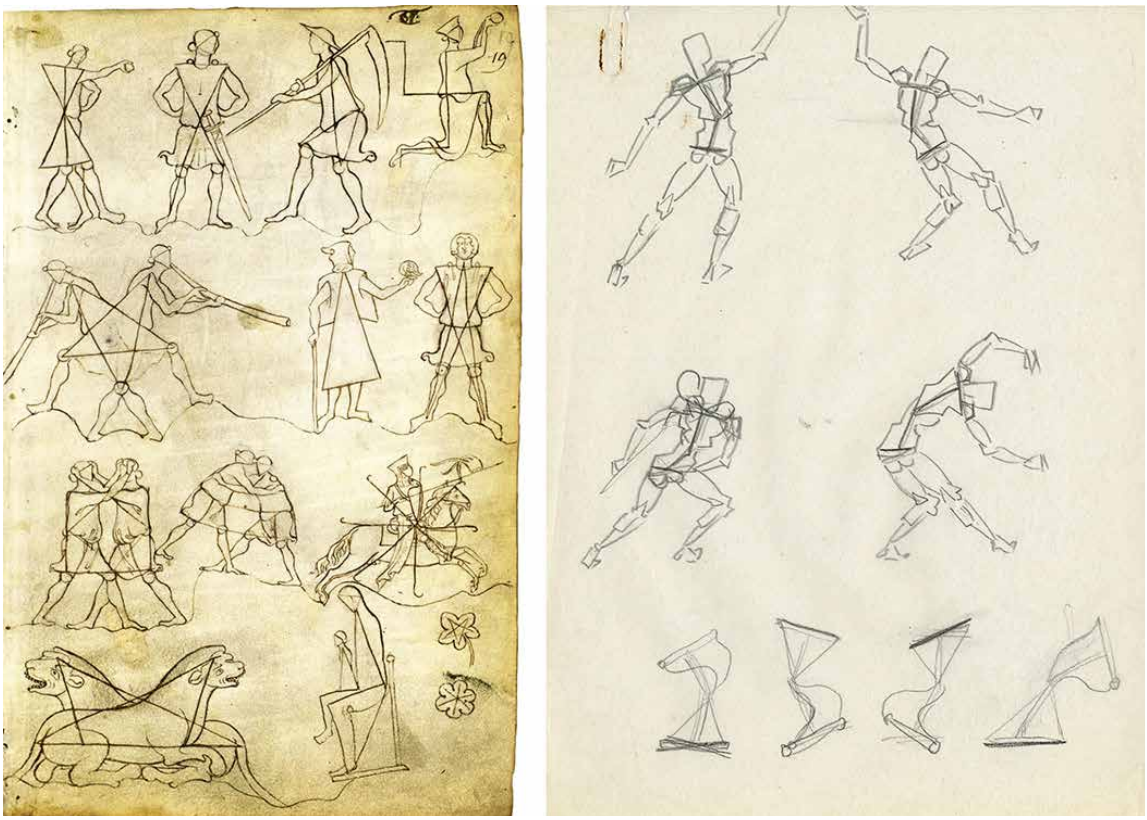


Figure 3-4. Villard de Honnecourt, *Carnet*, plate 37, folio 19r, Rudolf Laban, *Choreology \ Spationom*, drawing (Archive Ref No L/E/1/27). From the Rudolf Laban Archive, University of Surrey, © University of Surrey.

In the correlation we could draw between the drawings of Villard de Honnecourt and those of Rudolf Laban (Fig. 3-4), it would be excessively simple to reduce the similarities that can be perceived in them to the effects of schematization. Noticeably, both highlight the essential role played by the center of gravity, wishing to account for the necessary balance of the figure. We should also note here the tension between heraldism and fulcrum, between plane of the body and movement.[7]

[7] Laurence Louppe notes that what is at stake as early as Feuillet's system is 'the loss of support': it is, she says, 'the quality of the loss of support which grounds dance' (Louppe 2005: 51).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

Hans R. Hahnloser provides a detailed analysis of each of the plates in Villard de Honnecourt's album. As regards in particular the figures in plate 37 reproduced below, which he analyzes one by one, he notes that 'We see how Villard, starting from a customary method, is searching through various uncertain attempts for a fixed method and a measurable norm.' These diagrams, Hahnloser suggests, have a 'constructive and normative character' (1972: 93, 361).

Those representations by Villard de Honnecourt and Rudolf Laban fail to account for the plane, or the body, or movement, though they claim to deal with all of these. Pierre Legendre postulates the existence of a '*system of dances*' (a system for the representation of bodies), as though one were ordaining on the 'unique man of ideal'[8] (1978:40). In addition to the codification of the ballet in the West since the 18th century, one could certainly think here of systems like those of Laban.[9]

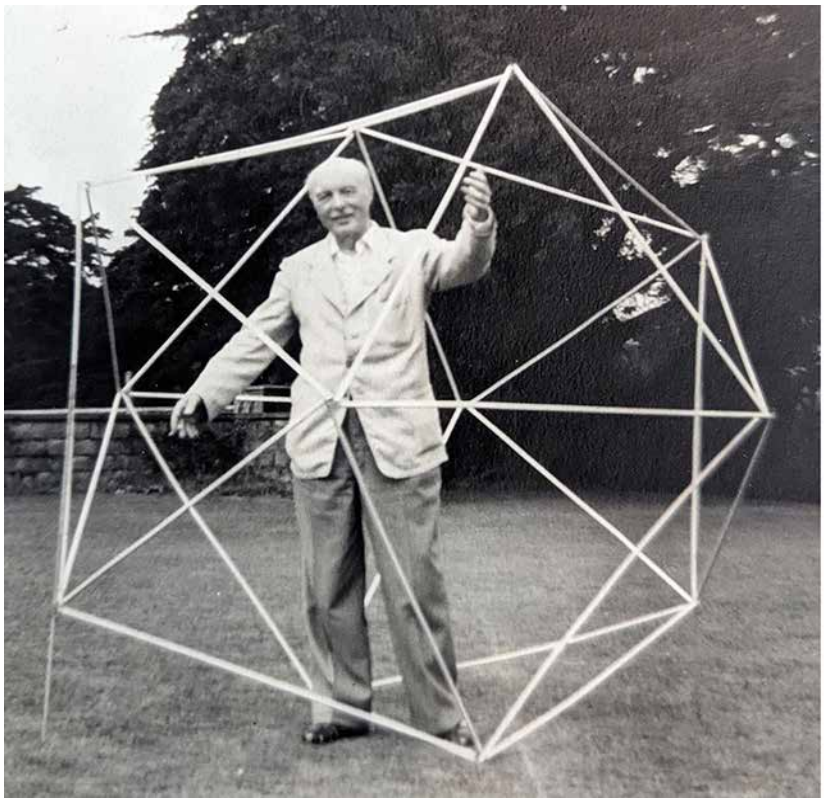




Figure 5-6. Photograph of Rudolf Laban standing within an icosahedron at the Ashridge Summer School, 1955. © June Petit. (Repository GB 1701 LC/A/1/5/22). Trinity Laban Archive collections, London, UK., and Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, Galleria Giorgio Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro, Venice, 1490, tempera on canvas, 213 x 95 cm (commons.wikimedia).

[8] Underlined by the author.
[9] As regards the notations of dance, see for instance Gabriele Brandstetter (2017).

Paradoxically, the braiding of arrows in Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian*, in Venice, and Laban's icosahedron (Fig. 5-6) have the same goal: to provide the body with a network of spatial coordinates. The arrows, Carlo Severi writes (2020:146), 'seem to multiply the viewpoints' on to the body. 'Sebastian moves his foot towards a plane which seems to be external to the space of the composition.' We note that the string of coral goes behind the head of the saint but in front of the marble of the alcove; that the left foot is set in front of the alcove, but that an arrow goes behind the left ankle, in front of the candle in the foreground and behind the right foot, whereas another arrow goes through the right thigh but in front of the left thigh. Such is the interlacing of the "objects"[10] of painting. If Laban's dancer is indeed encompassed within the icosahedron, inscribed in it, the character in Mantegna, while he is inserted in his alcove, is nonetheless contorted by the multiplication of contradictory indications of what is above or below.

Most of the arrows are situated relatively horizontally and represented in the maximum width offered by the painting. Most of them are therefore painted almost life-size. To situate our thinking, we should recall the analysis of the dispositif of painting proposed by Louis Marin on the basis of the Poussin painting *Et in Arcadia ego*, inasmuch as 'that painting represents representation':

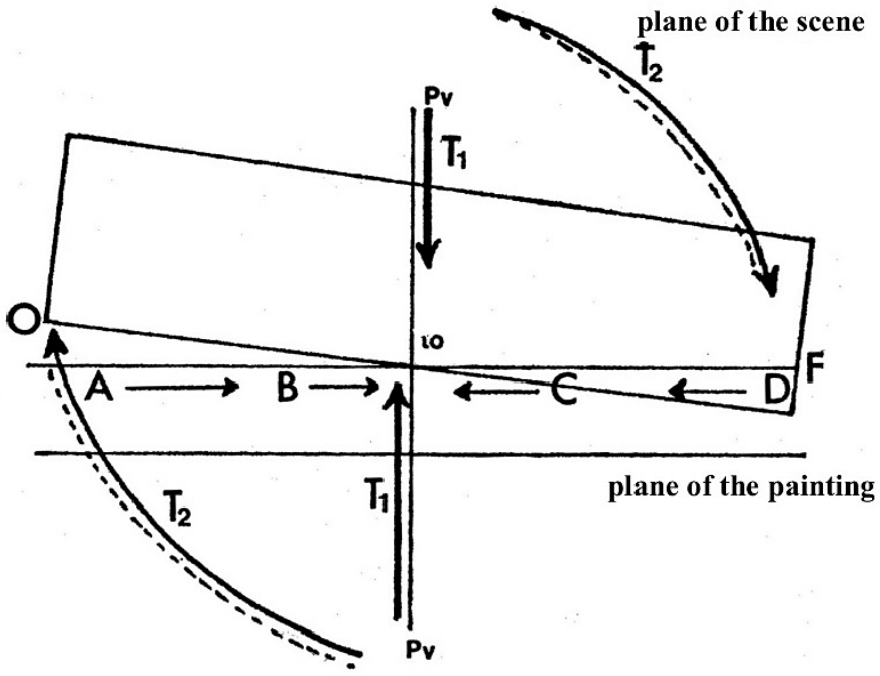


Figure 7. Lateralization of the deep structure of the represented space (Marin 1995: 58)

[10] As regards this notion of 'object,' see a detailed approach in Lucien Massaert (2025).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

> all happens as though the painting by Poussin effected a transformation, in the geometrical sense of the word, consisting in *lateralizing* the depth structure of the space represented […] All happens, fundamentally, as though a second eye were situated in the wings on the left of the scene, very close to the plane of the painting, and perceived from that hidden location, and as a form of *width*, the dimension of *depth* opened within that plane […]. But that enigmatic, concealed second eye, that anamorphic eye has left a trace spread all over the painting; it is thereby inscribed in the figures.[11] (1995:63, 56, 59, modified translation)

Marin proceeds to add that any narrative produced by painting results from 'the *hidden presence* of that second eye in the wings' (1995:60) modified translation. The diagram he proposed (Fig. 7) offers in a planar view the dispositif of all representation, whether of painting, theatre or dance. This folding of the viewpoint on to the distance point[12] is assuredly what Mantegna's painting effects, in a probably even more manifest manner, 'the dimension of *depth* opened in the plane' being here reduced to a minimum by the depth of the marble alcove. If, as Carlo Severi proposes, the arrows constitute points of view on the body, they fold down our gaze, both to the left and to the right, in the wings, in other words on to the aforementioned distance points. And the eye, as Marin writes, leaves its trace – in the figures-objects-arrows – 'spread all over the painting.'

The probably vain attempt to reduce the body in general, and the dancer's moving body in particular, through the input of geometrical coordinates, is perfectly demonstrated by Mantegna with that multiplication of geometrical vectors which Carlo Severi defines as being a multiplication of points of view.[13] However much the gaze may wish to grasp the body from all sides, what is given is always only an image of the body; the body eludes it. As Hahnloser writes, concerning Villard de Honnecourt's figures, all attempts to grasp it remain 'uncertain.'

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[11] Author's own italics

[12] It is impossible not to notice the striking similarity between the operation proposed by Marin and the operation consisting in projecting the paradigmatic axis on to the syntagmatic axis which characterizes for Roman Jakobson what he calls the "poetic function."

[13] For those who might wonder why the question of the writing of dance, a writing which meets its own aporias, is not being further developed here, we will refer, in addition to the text by Gabriele Brandstetter (2017), to the excellent chapter in Frédéric Pouillaude's work, 'D'une graphie qui ne dit rien' (2009:207-242).

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2. Ground

We all know the virtual nature of the blank page, or the promise of space in a painting. The canvas, known as a "support," constitutes the necessary condition for the "projection" of representation. However, as Daniel Sibony writes, 'in dance, the scriptor, the support and the text is the body' (1995:145). Hence, the very specific function of the ground for dance, a ground which, following Sibony, cannot have the same status as the body/support. This three- in-one of the scriptor, the support and the text in the body of the dancer, this collapse of the structure scriptor-support-text, calls for an entirely different approach to the writing of dance. The ground, the place where the body comes down, is therefore a reminder of the reality of gravity, of weight, but it isn't the locus of inscription of dance. That ground, that ichnography, is what our text aims to examine, to show precisely why it is not a place of inscription or a support.

Louis Marin (1987:35, n. 13) observes that Claude Perrault, in his translation of Vitruvius, notes that 'one of the three representations of the architectural edifice is *ichnography* […] the representation of its ground plan. The term comes from the Greek *ichnos*, which means footstep, trace left on the ground. Perrault's note is as follows:

> *Ichnographia*. The term ichnographia made up of ἴχνος, trace, and, γράφω, I describe, strictly signifies the plan or trace formed on the ground by the base of a body resting on it; this is what we call terrestrial, or planimetric plane. In architecture, it is a transverse section of a building, which represents the circumference of the whole edifice with the thickness of the walls, the distribution of the different rooms composing it, the dimensions of the doors and windows, the ledges/juttings of the columns and the doorjambs, in a word with all that can be seen in a section of this type. (Vitruvius 1847, Tome I, n. 52, p. 104)

For architecture, ichnography is the fundamental "representation": it is on this basis that the edifice can be erected, and it will remain after the building has turned to ruins. Falling, dropping, collapsing, are among the commonplaces of contemporary dance. The weight of the body, their fall-out compelled recognition, after the reign of the ideal of elevation. The weight of the bodies, their fall-out, the drops of perspiration spurting and shining under the light of the spotlights and falling on to the ground, the flushing of the skin, a trace of the repeated brutal falls to the ground, and let us not forget the smell of the place, the smell of the bodies and their perspiration. For want of being able to trust a representation of dance, which turns out be impossible, as Frédéric Pouillaude observes: these are therefore the elusive remnants that we propose to question.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

Architecture, like choreography, provides for journeys, it manages them. Commenting on the relationship between architecture and dance in Valéry's *Amphion* and *Dance and the Soul*, Véronique Fabbri writes that those works

> which present two figures of constructors, make it possible to displace the traditional opposition between the arts which produce solid works, able to be analyzed according to mathematical and formal principles, and the arts which are considered as evanescent, because they are arts of time, in particular dance. (2007:122)

In this way we find corroborated by Valéry's approach the necessary detour proposed here between dance and architecture, as a way of thinking their respective spaces and their representations.[14]

Having established the need for this roundabout journey let us start again from the question of the 'ichnography [of the edifice] as representation of its ground plan,' and let us see how Yve-Alain Bois approaches this indecision between plan and perspective, between two marks of an impossible totalization. He writes that, whereas Sebastiano Selio, in his *Primo libro d'Architettura* (published in 1537), still separated the three graphic instances (plane - cross section - elevation) drawn on the same sheet and articulated geometrically, Peruzzi, prefiguring axonometry, wishes to show 'the "mental image" of the building [referring to the term used by Claude Bragdon (1932) to designate axonometry], the way in which the spaces are articulated with one another' (Bois 1984:132),[15] adding that his drawing is 'closer to the "facts" than to appearances.' Yve-Alain Bois describes Baldassarre Peruzzi's drawing (Fig. 8) as follows:

> Conceived as a manner of *methodological demonstration* […] this drawing exposes in a single image and without tripartition a ground plan (in the foreground [its vanishing point is very distant]), a partial elevation of the pillars, built on this plane (with cross section of the pillars), and an elevation in an orthogonal projection (in the background). (*ibid.*)

[14] Let us note that *Nouvelles de danse* has devoted its volume 42/43 (Brussels, Éditions Contredanse, spring-summer 2000) to this problematic of "Dance and Architecture," though the contributions are far removed from the problematic developed here. Paul Virilio indicates that he too was led to take an interest in choreographic notation through his architectural research (Louppe 2005: 47-49).

[15] Writing about this drawing by Peruzzi, Yve-Alain Bois talks of 'proto-axonometric elevated view.'

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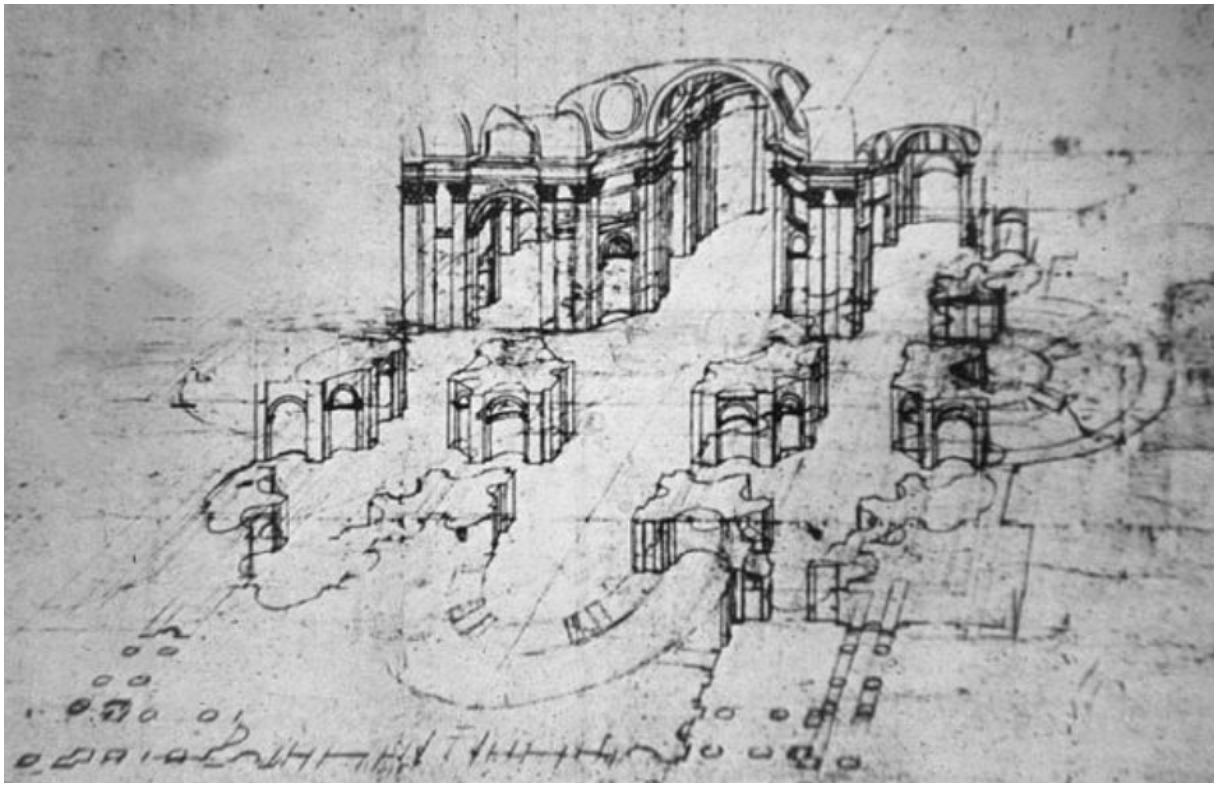


Figure 8. Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Project for St. Peter's Basilica, Rome*, 1505, Florence, Uffizi Gallery, Drawings and Prints Department.

What is most remarkable here is the importance of the ground: it occupies the entire space, the horizon line being pushed far beyond the upper edge of the drawing. This emblematic drawing by Peruzzi, with its 'desire of systematic spatial exposition,' lays bare the aporias of representation. Yve-Alain Bois proposes this exceptionally eloquent formula concerning axonometric representation: 'Just like the knight in chess, it proposes an oblique approach to a Western optical prejudice, a generalized wavering' (1984:134). With this idea of obliquity we meet again the necessity, pointed out above by Louis Marin, of tipping over virtually into the wings of representation in an effort to grasp it.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

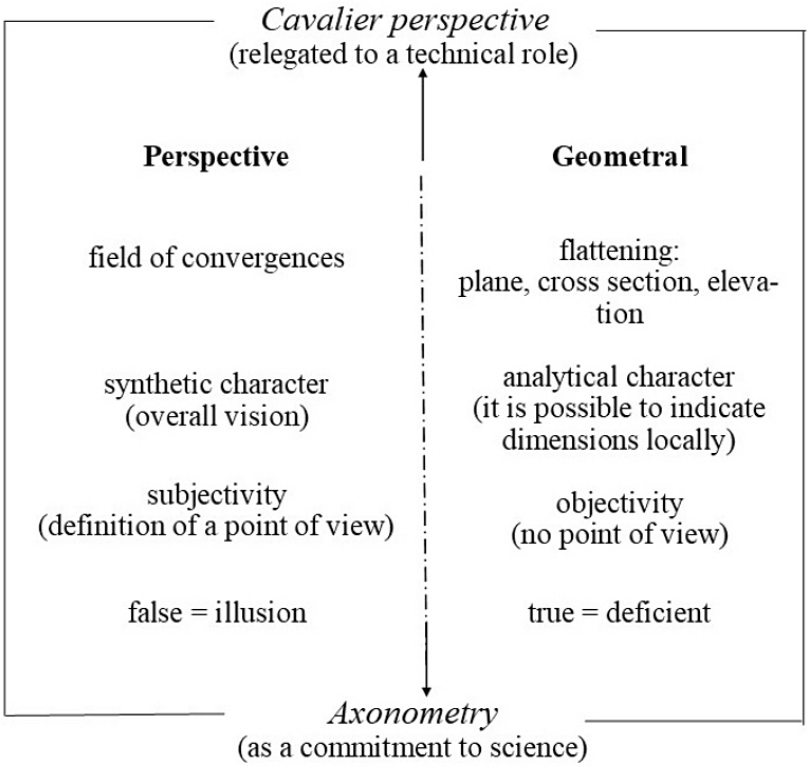


Figure 9. Pierre Boudon: Side-by-side comparison of a perspective and a geometral (1993:50).

As we have shown, Pierre Boudon (1993) relies on the work of Yve-Alain Bois[16] to bring together the terms of the diagram above (Fig. 9). The title *Counter Constructions* of the works by Van Doesburg which Pierre Boudon evokes, associated with the term "(de) representation" in Céline-Marie Hervé – we could also think of Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" – shows that the references to architecture have to be conceived here both at the level of construction and at the level of its questioning, its failure, its impossibilities. The representations of Laban's icosahedron can be seen as pertaining to an axonometric perspective, as meant to be approached from up close – if not conceived as apprehended from the inside – with a quasi-absence of vanishing perspective of the parallel sides. Between a trickle-down in the form of *dripping* of the cloud of drops of sweat scattered in the air by the dancer and Laban's crystal – ideal in the same way as Leonardo's Vitruvian body –, *between the crystal of the plane and the smoke* of the sublime,[17] clearly opens a spacing in which the dance's body cannot be asserted as such.

[16] He refers to the three following texts: Yve-Alain Bois, "Axonométrie", *Architecture/Arts plastiques*, Paris, CORDA (Comité de la recherche et du développement en architecture), 1979, pp. 251-366; Yve-Alain Bois, Bruno Reichlin, Jean-Paul Rayon, Nancy Troy, *De Stijl et l'architecture en France*, Brussels, Mardaga, 1985; Yve-Alain Bois, "De – ∞ à 0, à + ∞", in El Lissitzky (1890-1941): *architecte, peintre, photographe, typographe*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1991.

[17] Or the flame and the crystal in Valéry, see Benedetta Zaccarello (2005).

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Representations in a linear perspective or in an axonometric projection, or the "utopia" of a curvilinear perspective, are conventions the coexistence and incompatibility of which reveal the impossibility of a "true" representation, one that would correspond to our natural vision, which both sweeps and focuses. As shown by Edwige Phitoussi, in Valéry the 'loss of the image, the absence of a "general figure" is asserted again and again in his *Notebooks*, and in literary form in *L'idée fixe*' (2009:132). The 'problems in a more subtle kind of mathematics' (Valéry 1989: 5), which Degas had apparently seen in art are, as Edwige Phitoussi writes, 'the art of the plane […] At the point where the figure comes undone and the act comes to its end' (2009:134-135).

Whereas philosophy would tend to essentialize dance, to the point of making it the essence of art, the primary, original art, for Degas, on the contrary, the raising of the ground, his very high skylines lead to a failure of figures, casting doubt on ideality to the benefit of some kind of paradoxical, because dissolving, materialization. How would the plane undo the figure? In a text which Hubert Damisch devotes to Dubuffet's paintings, we read the following:

> It is again Valéry who observed, in the pages he devoted to Degas, that the notion of form is changed – if not actually called into question – by the projection on to the vertical plane of the canvas of the horizontal plane of the ground, which then no longer acts as a neutral, indifferent background, but as an essential factor in the vision of things, and can – at a stretch – constitute the very subject of the painting.[18] (1984:111)

And so, this is Degas's dance ground, the ground as the "very subject" of dance! And indeed, Valéry writes: 'Degas is one of the rare painters who gave due emphasis to the *ground* […] The ground is *an essential factor in our perception of things*' (Valéry 1989:42-43).[19] Some works go as far as to allow the ground to occupy almost the whole surface of the painting – see, for instance, *Before the Ballet*, kept in the Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art (c.1890-1892). Valéry adds that, for Degas, color is 'a local result of all the different sheddings and reflections of light in space, passing and repassing between all the bodies' (*ibid.* 43). The switches, emissions and reflections between the bodies of dance thus also become switches, emissions and reflections between the figures of painting. And Damisch goes on:

[18] See Paul Valéry, 'The Ground and the Formless' (Valéry 1989:42-47).
[19] We have underlined the expression which Damisch borrows in the singular and without inverted commas.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

> But the erection of the ground, and the dissolution of forms which it introduces, doesn't only have a negative sense: the ground has to be a wall and the wall has to be a ground, so that, starting from a surface which only offers the eye a patch of bewilderment or of tranquillity, it should all be taken up again *through gestures*. The *Wall of the ground* is the obstacle against which any pictorial doubt vanishes, the original foundation proffered to the gesture through which man introduces his figurative order within nature. (1984:111-112)

Damisch thus constructs a contradictory space, between the "patch of bewilderment" and abolished pictorial doubt, between "dissolution of forms" and "figurative order." This is the very question of how to apprehend dance, as well as the very question of representation. One feels one is reading Deleuze defining the monstrous: 'raising the ground[20] and dissolving the form' (1994:29). The ground of dance in Degas isn't a support or foundation but a place of dissolution. This lesson of Degas is what we propose as a starting-point to think dance itself. And Damisch again (1984:112): 'Hasty, elementary drawing style, less drawing than trace, man's inscription in sand or on the table, this *constant playmate* is nothing other for the painter than a "raised ground".' And indeed, Valéry has the "score" performed on the table:

> Let us suppose that we want to draw one of these formless things, but one which has a certain recognizable correspondence between its parts. If I throw a crumpled handkerchief onto a table, it looks like nothing. To the eye, at first, it is simply a chaos of creases. I can move one of the corners without disturbing the others. My problem, however, is to make my drawing show that it is a piece of cloth of a certain kind, thickness, and flexibility, and all in one piece. The question is, then, how to make *intelligible* a particular structure of an object which has no determinate structure… (Valéry 1989:44)

Here we are first, to borrow the words of Valéry, with that 'dissolution of forms,' 'one of these formless things,' tossed on to the plane, which 'looks like nothing,' 'a chaos,' and yet the shapeless – the movements of dance – is only apparent. It is a topology of folds – see the second column of Figure 1 – which can be shown through drawing: a solidarity of parts, 'a particular structure' where it is possible to 'move one of the corners without disturbing the others.'

---

[20] Clearly this "ground," this depth which rises in Deleuze does not have the solidity (support) or the pragmatic aspect (plane) of the grounds evoked so far in our text. One could rather, if I am allowed to use those metaphors, associate this ground with a soil saturated with water through which that water keeps moving up, or with the magma moving up from the abyss. We could estimate at this stage, drawing on the Lacanian instances, that the support (which is lacking) pertains to the conditions of possibility of the structure (S1), the plane to the symbolic constraints of language (S2), the ground to the imaginary (I) and finally the depth rising up to the Real (R).

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Figure 10. Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsa*l, c. 1874, oil on canvas, 58.4 x 83.8 cm, The Burrell Collection, © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collections.

In Degas' *Rehearsal* (Fig. 10), the regularity of the topological scroll is situated within the metaphor constituted by the spiral staircase. The raising of the ground, as in many other paintings and pastels by Degas – although this raising is less radical than in the Peruzzi drawing – leads to the dissolution of the figures of the dancers, 'a generalized wavering,' as Yve-Alain Bois described it about axonometry. Damisch again:

> 'scrambling the vertical with the horizontal, mixing them or instituting in the painting a plane of ambiguity between the two', it responds to the double wish to constrain the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground seen overhanging and at the same time to raise the ground as a wall which calls for some human intervention, through trace or print. (Damisch 1984:112)[21]

[21] Damisch is quoting Jean Dubuffet, Mémoire, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, vol. II, Paris, Hubert Damisch (ed.), 1967:169.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

Damisch then makes a connection with the human traces revealed by aerial photography, opposing them to the traces found 'in the depths' by traditional archaeology, and calling for giving a 'meaning, a value of information' 'to the strictly visual data.' Damisch thus jettisons a metaphysical vision of the deep, the concealed, in favor of a thinking of art which offers all of its meaning on the surface. This will lead him, in a text devoted to the work of Pollock, to compare his *drippings* to 'a surface, a playing area [in which the painter] did not hesitate to enter in person' (1984:149).[22] This 'gesticulation' by Pollock, around his canvas set on the ground, has always been compared to a dance with its throwing of colors through space, the traces of which the canvas will gather as they fall on to it. Damisch will also find here the logic brought to light by Valéry in the work of Degas, observing that with Pollock, in the same way, 'the *linearity* which will have imposed its law on figurative painting in the West gives up on itself,' and that in this 'erection' of the ground 'a certain notion of form, based on delineation, on the pre-eminence of the outline, is somehow called into question' (1984:139).

Just as an approach to Pollock's œuvre has to move away from conventional esthetics, accounting for the logic of dance requires that one should appeal to parameters that are different from those traditionally linked to the esthetics of form; in other words, we move away, in the formulation of Yve-Alain Bois, from the 'optical prejudices of the West.' As Deleuze writes: 'It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. There is cruelty, even monstrosity, on both sides of this struggle' (1994:28). If we are thus confronted with a 'blanket of confusion' if the 'original foundation' of representation collapses, it is a matter, as Louis Marin writes, of 'mak[ing] sense of the collapse,' taking account of the 'structural equivalence […] between construction and destruction, between composition and obliteration, between erection and collapse' (1987:35). Hence, there is no negativity in this dissolution of the ideal of a meaning of form but another modality of meaning has to be considered.

If there is a "music" peculiar to dance, it is the rhythm of the beats, of the slams of the steps on the ground, or the noise of the fall of bodies, associated to the noise of panting, of the short breath of breathlessness. Perhaps, writes Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, 'we are unable to represent or feel anything beyond the rhythm which is that of breathing, of heart beats or of the movement of waves' (2013:93); a paradoxical representation therefore, or a borderline representation which would only be a matter of breathing and heart beats. The ichnography of dance which we have been endeavoring to discern since the beginning by questioning the possibilities/impossibilities of representation – an impossibility which we have noted from here from the outset of our reflections, following the ascertainment of Frédéric Pouillaude, more recently reiterated by Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor –, in other words, the falling of bodies on the ground and their rising again, this ichnography can

[22] Hubert Damisch, "Stratégies 1950-1960".

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probably be approached as a dispositif, in the sense which Philippe Ortel gives the word, inasmuch as 'physical and technical realities,' 'instruments' are invariably involved in it. Ortel specifies that '[t]he form of the dispositif is coupled with a force which simultaneously justifies and threatens it,' an 'anarchic reality.' The dispositif brings together a *configuration* 'and a *conjuncture*: chaos, chance, brutality are, he writes, its inevitable reverse side.' According to one of the examples he analyses, the contact between the body and the ground would be like '[t]he contact between the hull [of a ship] and the wave' (2008:51-53). He also notes that this dispositif would be a pulsional one, evoking Jean-François Lyotard. If the delineation is dismissed, if form comes undone, this is because representation

> reactivates the link with this repressed reverse side, as by stressing the internal organisation of the instruments rather than their use, it brings back to the foreground the chaotic background which they are supposed to master. (Ortel 2008:53)[23]

3. Remainder

To consider that 'reverse side,' 'the chaos, chance, brutality' discussed by Ortel, let us come back to Wahl, and to what results from his appeal to Aristotle's theory of place. One should not focus on the acknowledgment that 'two figures like those of space and place […] alternate and disallow each other [...] each of them being necessarily involved,' 'their unsurpassable alternation,' writes Wahl, indexes the representation 'of the *Real*: pointing in it a specific *impossible*' (1996:39).

To clarify our remarks, and this notion of the Real – the reader will recognize the Real defined as impossible by Lacan –, we could refer to what Wahl states in an openly provocative manner in the opening of his paper at the Cerisy 'Bataille' conference, in 1972, to make sure, as regards the œuvre of Georges Bataille, that he would not be 'reassuring or comforting.'[24]: *'How can the subtraction of a puddle of sperm be exchanged for the addition of a string of pearls?'* (1973:199, reprinted in 2025:91), the sperm being later called a 'supplement.'

It would be legitimate to wonder whether François Wahl isn't here playing again the scene of 'seduction' in the Turin hospital of catechumens scene described by Rousseau in his *Confessions*: 'I saw something white, like glue, shoot towards the fireplace and fall on the ground, which turned my stomach' (1963:68, modified translation). Stéphane Lojkine comments: 'the material, geometral journey [constitutes] the provisional cancellation of the "as if" of metaphor' (2001:228-229), the lifting of the constitutive distance of representation, 'the presence-absence of the metaphorical cut […] is

[23] Quoted by Hervé 2018:66 and Hervé 2024:37.
[24] How could we indeed avoid normalizing what can never be reassuring or comforting in our encounters with dance?

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

the "making surface"' (2001:232). And indubitably our experience of dance, radically different in this respect from our relationship with painting, is first and foremost an invalidation 'of the "as if" of metaphor,' of the distance constitutive of representation. Here we find again the relationship between the calling into question of representation and the rising-up of the surface. And Wahl adds:

> Desire is produced by what it produces. That is, less by that (other) body that is supposed to arouse it than by the sperm in which it will be resolved (as which it will succeed) – and in a general way, through the objects which the body lets issue out of itself, that it leaves as traces of itself. (1973:219; 2025:109)

So, we have on the one hand a trace as subtraction and on the other hand a string of pearls as addition. It would not be impossible once again to make a detour by way of Aristotle, but this time by referring to his treatise *On the Generation of Animals* (D'Onofrio 2014).[25] Stéphane Lojkine notes, again in Rousseau, a counterpart to the ignominy of the Turin episode in the 'something blue' of the flowering periwinkle glimpsed by Madame de Warens, his mother (Lojkine 2001: 230-231). If we wish to continue the parallel with dance, we will say that the supplement, the dancer's sweat for instance, produces the desire to dance. And Wahl explains:

> Therefore: that setting in motion of the supernumerary signifier, this rotation of syllables through sequences which are not controlled by a chain of communicable meaning/practice, this *assault on the economy of meaning* (and aren't the two words a tautology?) has something to do with this *dispersion of objects*, this irreducible diversity of matter, which are the other side of eroticism. (1973:240 (2025:129))

Like Stéphane Lojkine, here Wahl refers to the logic of the 'supernumerary signifier,' superfluous in one register, absent in the other.[26] As for Deleuze, he evokes Kafka's short story "Blumfeld," and the 'two little ping-pong balls which of their own accord jump on to the wall of the floor, bounce all over the place,' as well as the Ballet by Debussy and Nijinsky in which 'a small tennis ball comes and bounces on the stage' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 207).[27] The question thus arises: what would a 'dispersion of objects' involve in dance, linked to a 'violence wrought on the economy of meaning'? Shedding light on his remarks, François Wahl next suggests an equally eloquent

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[25] See for instance his 'diagram of fluids,' p. 63 (Aristotle 1995. *Generation of Animals, in The Complete Works of Aristotle.* Jonathan Barnes (ed.). Princeton, N.J: Princeton Univ. Press.

[26] See Gilles Deleuze. À quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme. In: *Histoire de le philosophie*, ed. by François Chatelet, vol. 8. Paris: Hachette. 1973: 323-328 and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss. In: Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: PUF, 1950: XIV.

[27] See also Deleuze 1969: 83-91, "Eleventh series. Of nonsense".

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version of his first utterance: *'how can the subtraction of a corpse be exchanged against the addition of a bunch of flowers?*,'[28] renewing a balancing movement between an ab-ject and a sublime and continuing his elucidation in these terms:

> Between that less and that more, *that lack of the body in being where it is inclined*, and that *surplus of signs* to say nothing, a substitution takes place, the latter with their multiplicity coming somehow to obturate the morcellating (privative) insignificance of the former. (1973:240 (2025:129))

Will we also accept to say that in dance there is a 'lack of the body in being where it is inclined,' and that breathing, breathlessness, sweat, the traces left by the dancer on the ground are 'surpluses of signs,' obturating what Jacques Lacan calls the Real; that which of the body cannot be reduced to a word or an image, cannot come to signify? If there is a peculiarity of that trace as it is conceived here – a trace also of the architectural ichnography touched on at the beginning of this text – it is that not unlike the trace in Derrida, it is set to become obliterated, the traces of the dancers are superimposed and erased as they are covered over, the drops of sweat evaporate immediately, they "are" merely in the instant of their appearance, hence it is futile to pretend to set them in the form of writing. Whoever claims to account for dance in itself, for the body as such can only be referred to the phenomenological epoche. We recall Derrida's comments based on Husserl: the living present 'is always already a trace. This trace cannot be thought based on the simplicity of a present whose life would be internal to itself. The self of the living present is originally a trace' (Derrida 1993[1967]: 95).

Coming back to those remainders, to that Real, that impossible of dance and of its representation, we will note that this Real is indeed essential to extract a structure in order to tie the symbolic constraints of language to the imaginary register of representations, without which the language of dance and its imaginary would be in a state of abandonment, incapable of weaving any narrative, any meaning whatsoever. We will therefore note that the traces, the ground exhibit an operational character in the structure. We could recall here Georges Didi-Huberman's comment on the way the flowers in the meadow were painted in Fra Angelico's *Noli me tangere* in the San Marco Convent. Didi Huberman describes those flowers as 'punctiform deposits' of white and red pigments 'which produce very subtle reliefs on the wall.'

[28] It is difficult not to think here of Kant (*Critique of Judgment*. Indianapolis/Cambridge. Hackett Publishing Company. 1987: 84. n. 50), and of the passage which Jacques Derrida devotes to it ("The Sans of the Pure Cut". In *The Truth in Painting*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press. 1987). See also Francis Ponge. "La façon de faner les tulipes". In *L'opinion changée quant aux fleurs (Nouveau Nouveau Recueil II. 1940-1975*. Paris: Gallimard. 1992:120-124; Paris: éd. Fario, 2023: 37-42). (See also Georges Bataille 1970:173-178). We should devote a detailed commentary to this last text, as it corresponds closely to the movement of our thinking here.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

> They [those colored rhythms] do not *describe* anything, do not provide anything we could distinguish: those flowers do not include any calyxes, corollas, pistils or stamens […] tiny circular clusters […] Those red spots are even painted in the way Fra Angelico painted stigmata […] There is a displacement of the iconic value, hence equivocal of representation […] The iconic character of those red signs becomes secondary – or even undergoes the trial of a logical aporia. (1990:22-23)

Didi-Huberman thus points to the structurally operational character of those signs: 'they are not more of "the background" than of the "figure," or rather [they] produce the one from the very work of the other.' The figure is produced from the work of the background (or the ground). Didi-Huberman then adds: 'It is therefore a matter of exceeding the iconographic[29] evidence of the figure and the meaning: evidence which as a last resort only deals with storia or with allegory' (1990:25). By dint of only wanting to see in art the image, the history or the narrative, increasingly, current commentaries or analyses tend to miss out on the very meaning of the work, which can be grasped on the very surface of the material data and the signifying articulation. Being too much painting, being crushed on the surface of the fresco, those pigment-flowers of Fra Angelico's give existence to the structure, they allow symbolic and imaginary to be distinct everywhere else in the painting.

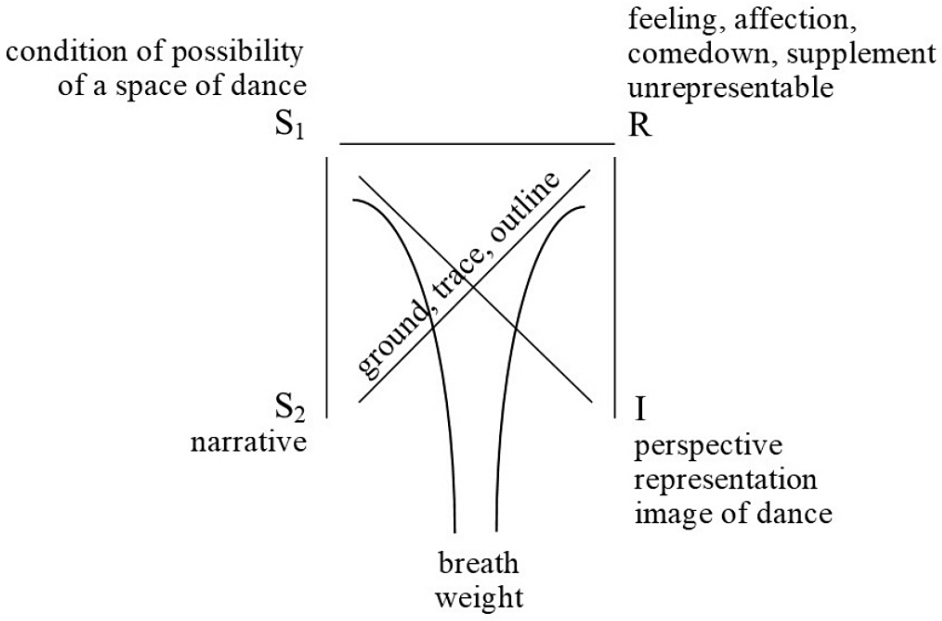


Figure 11. After Jacques Lacan's 'schema L' and 'schema R' graphs.[30]

[29] It will be noted that it takes only one letter for the term "ichnography" to seal the fate of iconography.
[30] See Marc Barbut, "Sur le sens du mot structure en mathématiques". *Les temps modernes* 246. Problèmes du structuralisme. November 1966:791-814 . See also "Le carré sémiotique", Algirdas J. Greimas & Joseph Courtès. *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la science du langage*. Paris: Hachette (1979: 29-33).

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Though Ortel writes that '[t]he real threatens at any moment to […] engulf the symbolic' (2008:53), we tend to think that it is as though the imaginary extension[31] were subtracted and in its place came a possible inscription of S2, the symbolic constraints of language being transferred as indices in the Real (Fig. 11). If we are to include the ground and the trace in this diagram, they can only form the Eulerian continuous path between the four instances,[32] the ground and the trace coming under both the necessities of language, S2, and the Real, and being also transcribable in the imaginary.[33] The *petit a*, like the mazzocchio,[34] circulates between the series of the structure.

'The addition of a string of pearls' or 'of a bunch of flowers,' the free beauty of a wild tulip,[35] all constitute the emblems of a Real such as Malevich's *Black Square*, a sublime black tulip, an icon, a paragon of all art, not the last painting but the first one of a new classicism in which Gérard Wacjman sees 'the object of the century' (1998). Dance, the ballet, have not failed to have recourse, often in a rather stereotypical manner, to botanic metaphors. But let us take these few fragments of two versions of Mallarmé's *Prose* quoted by Jean Petitot (1989) in the study he devoted to that text,

> Every flower spread out enlarged,
> And so immense they were…,
> The manifold lilies' stem would grow,
> Claiming abundance should have come
> Glory of long desire…,
> To a size far beyond our reason
> … sheds her ecstasy[36]

[31] René Lew uses the term 'extension' to describe S2, R and I, respectively symbolic, real and imaginary extensions of significance S1. See for instance Lew (2017:33).

[32] It should be pointed out that in this Eulerian path none of the four instances is primary. Each of them is to be taken within the whole of the path.

[33] It was only as a first approximation that (in note 20 above) we had situated the ground as pertaining precisely to the imaginary, and not to the course of the different instances.

[34] See Jean Louis Schefer, *Le déluge, la peste, Paolo Uccello*, Paris, Galilée, 1976. In the second edition, under the title *Paolo Uccello, le déluge*, Paris, P.O.L., 1999, Jean Louis Schefer, to our deep regret, abandoned the more explicitly semiological theorization of the first edition.

[35] See Jacques Derrida, ("The Sans of the Pure Cut", *op. cit.* Kant, *La critique de la faculté de juger*, trad. franç A. Philonenko, Paris, Vrin, p. 76 n. 2.

[36] Mallarmé, *Prose (for des Esseintes)*. This refers to an older version (Gualdo copy, BNF, Montesquiou collection) and to the text published in the *Revue indépendante* of January 1885. See Mallarmé (1945: 55-57 and commentary 1472-1474).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0002 | **punctum.gr**

The more the flower rises, the more it sets itself up, the more it marks the imminence of decline, of loss, of detumescence, of erasure, '… with a clear contour, and this breach,' as Mallarmé writes (*Ibid*.). Jean Petitot synthesizes the logic of the parergon developed by the poem based on two oppositions, 'finery and breach,' '*supplement* and *lack*,' in other words, he writes, an 'ensigned' Real (1989:171). Which, in the present configuration, clearly marks the privileged relationship between the registers of the symbolic and the real.

Kant's tulip could thus reconcile the regularity of the *crystal and* the vagaries of the movements of *smoke*, not unlike the abstraction which, according to Benedetta Zacarello, would be 'the only factor able to sum up the apparently shapeless complexity of the real into a creative principle,'[37] abstraction being here those fall-outs of dance, those traces, that ground on which dance 'sheds her ecstasy,' hence an abstraction pertaining more to the meanders of so-called abstract expressionism[38] than to a so-called geometric abstraction. Rather than considering, like the Valéry of the *Notebooks*, that there is a 'crystallization' in *inventio* (Zaccarello 2005:89), shouldn't we, on the contrary, focus on what in those fluids undermines all hardness, all solidity, all assurance of an objective grasp: 'any calyxes, corollas, pistils or stamens' (Didi-Huberman 1990:22), rather 'messy encrustation of pollen,' or again 'tuft of sordid appearance,' 'old rag of aerial manure' (Bataille 1970:173 and 176).

The supposedly objective grasp of a '*system of dances is articulated*, as Pierre Legendre writes, *with a phantasmatic organisation*' (1978:40).[39] Here we find the preliminary question he asks in *La passion d'être un autre. Étude pour la danse*: 'what is supposed to be reproduced by the body?' Is it a matter of questioning the hypothesis of dance as a production of the body? Legendre postulates that 'through dance the text of desire is exposed' (1978:11 and 10), defenseless in its *objects*: breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces. 'Glory of long desire,' its fall-out, that Real, 'violence wrought on the economy of meaning': 'it is in desire,' writes Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, 'that it [the movement] takes flesh' (2013:95).

Of the dispositif noted by Ortel, Frédéric Dahan tells us that its interest isn't 'to come into it and to be in actuality [in it],' as with a body inscribed in Laban's icosahedron, but to introduce questions, adding: 'the interest of every dispositif is to produce a real.' It is also to Frédéric Dahan that we owe the formulation: 'The drive is a gap in the order of concepts.'[40] Hence the difficulty/impossibility of thinking/representing dance. Can we

[37] Benedetta Zaccarello, "Le 'Drame intérieur' et l''ornement' in *L'introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*." in Christina Vogel (ed.), *Valéry et Léonard: le drame d'une rencontre. Genèse de l''Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*'. Rostocker Romanistische Arbeiten Band 12. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 2007: 122.
[38] See our study concerning the questions of ornamentation and motif (Massaert 2024).
[39] Underlined by the author.
[40] Frédéric Dahan, "D'une écriture pulsionnelle... ?", paper presented at the conference of Dimensions de la psychanalyse, "Mythes et apories de la sexualité et des pulsions," Paris, 4 and 5 October 2025.

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thus suggest that dance is jouissance, just as Lacan was able to state that 'writing is jouissance' (2006: 129).[41] The letter, evoked by René Lew in the beginning of this text, or rather its surroundings as a metaphor of the space of the body, is taken up again by Frédéric Dahan as, more precisely, the 'journey of the letter a which never ceases to write desire.' If it is possible to establish something like a discourse of art in general and a discourse of dance in particular, we will aver that, not unlike the analyst's discourse according to Lacan, it is the objet a – 'something which is defined by a loss,' says Lacan (1991: 13), breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces, 'cause of desire' – which is found in the place of the agent, whereas the subject is inscribed here in the place of the other.[42]

Translated from the French by Philippe Hunt

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[41] Session of 19 May 1971.
[42] Knowledge being in the place of truth.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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The aspectuality of space, time, and bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas*

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ABSTRACT

This study applies aspectual semiotics to *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983), the landmark choreographic work by Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Rather than evaluating it aesthetically, the piece is used as a testing ground for the semiotic theory of *aspectuality*, defined as a relational structure linking an observing subject to temporal, spatial, or bodily objects. Temporally, the choreography operates through serial composition, producing inchoative and progressive aspects akin to linguistic verb aspects. Spatially, the piece is structured around a linear, one-dimensional arrangement of dancers that gradually multiplies into parallel, orthogonal, and diagonal lines – an idealised geometry made legible to the attentive observer. On a bodily level, finally, the dancers function as "moving bodies" (in Susan Foster's terms), creating an ambivalence between group cohesion and individual autonomy that resists fixed representation. The author ultimately proposes "constructivism" as a more fitting label than "minimalism" for the work, emphasising its rhythmic abstraction, embodied geometry, and invitation to active spectatorial meaning-making.

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Questions and Pretext

In this study, I pose simple questions – though they are by no means easy. What dances? What is the space of dance? What is the time of dance? As we can see, these are very general questions. The first, for example, which seems the most unusual, would call for answers such as: a dancer, a human

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being, a body. However, I do not claim to answer them at that level of generality. For that, we would need to agree on what constitutes the common denominator of the three questions, namely dance. Yet we can surmise that what is meant by "dance" varies infinitely across cultures (where it can take on very different values); within a given culture, depending on the practices (in the West, one would notably distinguish between ballroom dance, competitive dance, and artistic dance); within a specific practice, for example, dance as a performing art, depending on the era, the type, the style, the choreographers, and so on.

What, then, is the point of giving these questions an air of generality? It shows that, for each specific case, they can be posed and that the answers – however specific they may be – are correlated with this generality. In other words, these questions call for a theoretical framework from which they can be conceptually determined and within which the answers make sense. This theoretical framework will be, as I will explain later, that of aspectual semiotics.

The specific case studied here involves just one piece. It is the *Rosas danst Rosas*, choreographed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and premiered in 1983. Among the reasons that led me to choose it is that this work is fairly well documented. We know how difficult it is to produce analyses of works in the performing arts, particularly dance performances, which are often wordless and non-narrative. Words fail us, even just to describe them. For this particular work, researchers have access, notably, to a film[1] by Thierry De Mey (who also co-composed the piece's music with Peter Vermeersch) as well as video clips,[2] available on the Rosas YouTube channel (the name of the company founded specifically with this work), where certain "movements" and the "structure" or "combination" (in De Keersmaeker's own words) of the piece's second part are explained.

I will return to the description of these materials, but first I must clarify the connection I intend to establish between the general questions and the case under study. Despite the undeniable interest the piece has generated – since its premiere, *Rosas danst Rosas* has been performed over 500 times, including this year's performance as part of a tour that began in February with four Rosas dancers. It has also found broad resonance through the music video for an R'n'B song ("Countdown") in which the singer Beyoncé performs certain movements drawn from De Keersmaeker's piece – I will not attempt here to deal with its "meaning" or "value" as a work of art. The piece serves as a testing ground for me to experiment with concepts of semiotic analysis. Greimas (1976) did not proceed any differently with his *Maupassant*: despite the title, which seems to suggest the book is a general introduction to the writer, the

[1] *Rosas danst Rosas*, Avila, 1996.
[2] https://www.rosasdanstrosas.be/accueil/

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nearly three-hundred-page volume focuses solely on one short story, "Les deux amis," and its aim is essentially experimental and didactic, as made explicit by the book's subtitle: *The Semiotics of the Text. Practical Exercises.* The work serves as *a pretext*: the demonstration proceeds through its analysis (the analysis of its text, more precisely), but its aesthetic value and its significance within the broader context of Maupassant's works remain incidental, merely suggested by the extensive and sophisticated "yield" of the analysis. The true object of Greimas's focus is indeed "the text," in its generality, just as "dance" is the object of my study, even if the analysis is valid, at best (it is up to the reader to decide!), only for the work chosen as an example.

One might find the results unsatisfactory. There will be no general answers to the questions posed; moreover, the analysis provided as a response to a particular work does not claim to contribute to determining its aesthetic value.[3] It seems that the semiotic approach to dance, based on what my readings in the field have led me to conclude, is doubly risky: either the concepts it invokes are too general to have any real descriptive power and merely "translate" into its language forms of understanding that, in fact, function perfectly well without its intervention; or it has an *ad hoc* conception of dance, which reduces it to what the chosen method of analysis can say about it. I would like to guard against these risks through a cautious approach that seeks to assess the very applicability of semiotic analysis to dance. In this regard, my approach draws inspiration from – though does not align with – the one taken by Valeria De Luca (2021) in her book on tango, whose first three chapters are devoted to carefully establishing the analytical framework.

Nevertheless, a semiotic analysis can be expected to make a positive contribution to the interpretation of the work. The analysis lends a different meaning to the immediate appearances of a choreography than that which springs to mind based on conventions associated with this type of performance: time, space and the collective formed by the dancers in *Rosas danst Rosas* present particular aspects, some of which are surprising, and which are therefore capable of highlighting the work's originality. In this respect, my approach differs from the interpretation – however well-informed it may be – that Philippe Guisgand (2008) offered of the work in the first chapter of his book on De Keersmaeker's dance. His meticulous description of the movements, organised by section, does not seem to allow him to identify the work's key themes except through a psychological analysis of behaviour ("seduction, decision, reflection, despair"). As I hope to demonstrate, aspects are better suited to guiding the interpretation towards the work's form.

[3] Regarding the selected work, this was proposed by Haidu (2020), who seeks to demonstrate that *Rosas danst Rosas* is compatible with feminist thought.

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The choreographic form as an object of semiotic analysis

Semiotics analyses the concrete data of a practice only to subsume them under general categories that it interconnects. From this interconnection emerges an abstract object – a "form," in the semiotic and Hjelmslevian sense. A preliminary question (in my view, a crucial one) is whether this abstract object has any utility, or, at the very least, any immediate plausibility in the eyes of the practitioners concerned. Fortunately, in the present case, there will be no doubt on this matter: this abstract object, as a process, coincides with an internal order whose active presence in observable phenomena is presupposed as an artistic project.

Let us examine this more closely. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, I do not intend to analyse for its own sake a particular performance (the one I attended in February 2026 at the Rosas Performance Space in Brussels) or a particular video recording (De Mey's film), otherwise I would inevitably be led to note particularities (very numerous, as one might expect) that are specific to them without providing direct insight into the dance but rather, among other things, into the dancers' identities, the piece's duration, the atmosphere in the hall that day, or even the film's framing and editing choices. Even if I were to focus my observations on the questions posed above, I would still have to take into account contingent factors, for example, regarding the space, the dimensions of the stage, the nature of the floor, the lighting, and the arrangement of the audience. I would be forced to acknowledge that the performance and the film provide very different data, and even data that appear to be incompatible. I do not claim that the description of these data is without interest, but semiotics is not the best tool for this task. As is well known, what a semiotic approach aims at is the analysis of what "bears meaning," namely the signification inscribed in "things" (the stage, the lighting, the costumes, the dancers' movements) but detachable from them.

The processual form which I propose to analyze semiotically is the choreography of *Rosas danst Rosas*. This is a partial analysis, focusing only on questions related to space, time, and something less easily characterized but let us call, for the moment, the bodies. Undoubtedly, specialists are capable of considering other formal objects for dance, since, obviously, certain dance practices are not choreographed. For the specific piece under consideration, however, choreography seems to me to be the appropriate object of analysis because, like many artistic works in Western culture, this one is, so to speak, "signed": it is indeed the work *of* A. T. De Keersmaeker, and this authorial status designates her as the choreographer.

What is choreography as a semiotic form? It is a syntagmatic constant instantiated in observable phenomena, which we refer to (following Hjelmslev) as its "manifestations." Beyond its concrete manifestations, the choreographic form is analysable and describable. Moreover, in the present case, it has a social existence as an object of discourse, since critics, specialists, and the author herself can speak of the choreography

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of *Rosas in Rosas* without referring to any of its particular manifestations. This discursive "existence" is not sufficient to grant it ontological status (unlike the equilateral triangle for the mathematician, one cannot infer that the choreography exists as an ideality and that all its manifestations instantiate this ideal form only imperfectly), but it does indeed have an epistemic status (the choreography serves to signify something) and a sociological status (it has a history and is part of a history).

The epistemic status of choreography is confirmed by De Keersmaeker's teaching approach outlined in the introductory video for *Re:Rosas! (The fABULEUS Rosas Project Remix)*, where she sets out to 'explain the structure, the combination, how that dance was made.' Choreography refers to this "structure." The suffix *-graphy* refers to the organized, combined nature of the movements danced in the piece. Structure therefore means here *pre-ordered*: the order of what has been planned, prepared, and rehearsed. Nevertheless, we shouldn't regard this to have the same status as a written text in the usual sense. It is well known that the choreography of contemporary dance pieces is difficult to put into writing.[4] De Keersmaeker (2020: 8) speaks much more accurately of "calligraphy."

In manifestations, movements are distinct, individual entities; yet, in analysis, they can be regarded as "variations" (again, following Hjelmslev) due to the organisational structure they share. At first glance, the analysis of variations seems a straightforward task, especially in light of our questions. For example, the multiple performances that follow one another day after day in a single venue, or even in different venues during a tour, give rise to variations in time, space, and body that can be characterized according to well-known categories (temporal measures, topographies, bodily figures) and subsumed under formal invariants. However, by using a performance of the piece and a film which presents itself as a work in its own right (a filmed performance rather than a recording of a previous performance) as my corpus of analysis, this task becomes more difficult because the variations in space, time, and body *cannot* then be characterized according to their ordinary categorisations and cannot, consequently, be subsumed under invariants. In doing so, my analysis offers greater assurance of capturing the choreographic form, as this form remains presupposed *despite* the differences perceived among the variations. I will take a simple example concerning the number of dancers, to illustrate what is at stake. In performances staged before an audience, the choreography calls for four dancers. But in the film, the piece features no fewer than eighteen dancers. In one of the shots in the fourth part of the piece, specifically, five dancers perform synchronised movements. In the introduction to *Re:Rosas!*, De Keersmaeker suggests, moreover, that 'you can make it with as many dancers as you want.' Even if we assume that these variations are truly significant

[4] It should be noted, however, that Karreman (2015) conducted a very interesting study on the notation and transmission techniques used by De Keersmaeker for the dancers in *Rosas danst Rosas*.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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(and that they express the 'life of a form' according to its 'metamorphoses', to borrow Focillon's [1943] metaphors), the choreography, as an organisational project, remains sufficiently stable to be identified as that of the *Rosas danst Rosas* piece. The question is to determine the parameters to be taken into account to ensure this stability in terms of the body, and the deployment of bodies in space and time.

The time of *Rosas danst Rosas*

What parameters determine the time of dance according to the choreographic form? Let us begin by eliminating parameters that are frequently invoked for the temporal characterization of a performed work, whether a concert or a stage performance. Duration is hardly relevant, as it partly depends on the performer's choice. For *Rosas danst Rosas*, the duration varies significantly between live performances (nearly two hours) and the film (less than an hour). Did the film cut parts of the dance? Yes and no. Through editing, it certainly shortened certain dance sequences (though it also sometimes extended them). But all the movements are there, filmed according to their respective tempos. Is the number of parts in the piece more significant? Undoubtedly, but it is not decisive. The film adds a prelude and a coda, without music, which do not alter the choreography but may, possibly, enhance its expression in the eyes of the viewer. The number of parts matters less, in any case, than their order, which remains unchanged. Not the objective duration, then, but tempo in its qualitative aspect. Not the number, but the order – that is, the qualitative aspect of a sequence. It is these two aspects of time specific to the choreographic form that need to be described.

The main tempo of the movements in *Rosas danst Rosas* has three successive aspects: movement (i) initiated abruptly, "attacked," (ii) held, "suspended,"[5] (iii) released slowly. In the second instructional video clip of the *Re:Rosas!* project, dancer Samantha van Wissen describes and demonstrates six movements used in the second part of the piece, a part where the dance is performed almost entirely in a seated position. Each of these movements is broken down into four equal beats, with a gesture, or a combination of gestures, to be executed on certain beats.[6] For the simplest movements, the first two aspects are expressed on the first beat. For example, movement D consists, on beat 1, of a gesture in which the upper body falls toward the knees and a

[5] "Attacked" and "suspended" are terms used during the learning of the piece's movements, as described in a glossary by Cvejić and De Keersmaeker (2012: 244–245).

[6] This second video clip is titled "The Vocabulary," which suggests that the grammatical framework remains lively, if not in contemporary dance creation, then at least in its didactic presentation (as a reminder, De Keersmaeker founded a dance school in Brussels in 1995, P.A.R.T.S., which gained an international reputation almost immediately). One problem with this "vocabulary," however, is that a single word, "movement," refers simultaneously to the parts of the choreography (as in a symphony), the basic sequences of the composition, and the actual gestures executed in each sequence. For the sake of clarity, I refer to them here, respectively, as *parts*, *movements*, *and gestures*, acknowledging that the last term is ambiguous because the gesture itself can be further broken down.

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hold in this folded position, then, on beats 2, 3, and 4, of a languid raising of the body, accompanied by the right hand with a slow, meditative gesture of smoothing the hair from the forehead toward the nape of the neck. This sequence of aspects is also found in the standard composition of two movements, the second of which is designated as a "pause" (even if it includes a gesture or two). For example, when movement D is followed by a pause, beats 5 through 8 (relating to the pause) express two successive relaxations, one beginning on beat 4 (on which the dancer has abruptly struck a pose similar to that of Rodin's The Thinker, with crossed legs and an elbow resting on a knee), the other beginning on beat 7. This combination heightens the impression of release and reinforces the contrast between bodily tension and relaxation.

As explained in the third video clip, the combination of these movements forms "phrases." Since each dancer is capable of performing a combination, each phrase is performed multiple times. When the dancers execute the phrase in exactly the same way, the positions are said to be "in unison," much like different voices in a polyphonic composition. In other cases, the phrase can be characterized based on the temporal relationships of its execution by the dancers. For example, positions are said to be "in a fan" when they are performed at different times, though in the same order for each dancer. For example, assuming that a letter represents a movement performed by a dancer and that there are four dancers performing the phrase (as is often the case), the composition "AAAA, BAAA, BBAA, BBBA, BBBB, BBBC, BBCC, BCCC, CCCC, DCCC, DDCC, DDDC, DDDD" expresses an in-a-fan composition of movements A, B, C, and D, following the same sequence of movements for each dancer, albeit with an unevenly staggered execution due to the repetition of the same movement.

Thus, the combination of movements creates the impression of a series. In fact, the choreography can be likened to the creative process of serial music, in which a musical phrase is repeated by several instruments, sometimes in unison, but more often with varied and superimposable temporal shifts. The music of the piece is, moreover, an (original) composition of serial music, reinforcing the impression conveyed by the dance.[7] In this sense, the piece does not merely take place "in" time; it is the direct expression of a temporality. The time of dance is conceived through choreography. Based on four canonical conceptions of temporality, two interpretations are possible to characterize that of the piece. One is, in my opinion, more defensible than the other, but the

[7] According to Philippe Guisgand (2017), the relationship between music and dance is that of 'two embedded forms of expression […]. De Keersmaeker is not concerned with a somewhat heavy-handed demonstration of an understanding of the musical process, but simply with a subtle allusion to the way in which music is constructed.' Thierry De Mey, quoted by Guisgand, comments on the creative process as follows: 'We needed a form that was extremely rigid, a veritable structural wall against which the four dancers would come crashing with all their might. In this case, the structure was a sort of implacable master imposing constraint, speed and exertion on the body.' *Constraint*, *speed* and *exertion* are another expression (and in a different order) of the three aspects of tempo mentioned above (held, abruptly initiated, slowly released), confirming that the relationship of embedding is indeed of an aspectual nature ('subtly allusive').

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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choice ultimately depends on the viewer's sensibility. Either the choreography has a marked beginning, starting from a simple composition of movements, and evolves through the gradual complexification of this composition, thanks to sequences with derived or related compositions, to timing discrepancies between these compositions, and to more global modifications of the series' order (fanning out, in reverse, etc.). Or the choreography explores a heterogeneous milieu of complex compositions, producing effects of repetition and differentiation due to the meticulousness of its unfolding. The two canonical concepts that can most certainly be ruled out for the piece are those that impose an end to the series, either starting from a beginning (by looping the temporality, as if returning to the starting point), or starting from some arbitrary state (giving "what happens" in time a denouement, such as the finale in a ballet). From the perspective of choreographic form, *Rosas danst Rosas* has no end. The work is simply interrupted.

It is easy to draw parallels between the elements just outlined to describe the time of dance and what linguists call aspects when characterizing verb tenses. A temporality defined by the middle is "iterative" and, due to the resulting serial effect, "frequentative." A temporality with a marked beginning, on the other hand, is "inchoative," and the serial effect makes it "progressive." At the specific level of gestures, the relevance of an aspectual description of their temporality had already been suggested by Greimas (1970: 58). A sudden gesture is "ingressive," equivalent to the adverb *suddenly*; a slow release is "degressive." The brief maintenance of a gesture can be described as "punctual," while a prolonged pause is equivalent to a "state."

Linguists have often observed that these aspectual categories could apply not only to verbs but also to adjectives, adverbs, and nouns (particularly deverbal nouns). Semioticians, following them, have considered that these aspects reflect a general mechanism for the discursive construction of any narrative. A theory of *aspectualisation*, grounded in a more general (and abstract) conception of aspect, has therefore been proposed.

Aspectual semiotics: a brief introduction

In *Sémiotique*, Greimas and Courtés (1979: 21–22) define aspectualisation as the meaning that can be conferred upon a text (according to a broad interpretation common in semiotics) due to the presence of an observer, who may be a reader or a viewer but also, by enunciative disengagement (*débrayage*), a narrator, a choreographer, a character, or a dancer onto whom the function of observation is projected. This disengagement opens the possibility of a secondary engagement (*embrayage*) within the text, where the observer would have left enunciative traces. For example, during the performance of *Rosas danst Rosas* that I attended, the audience could hear a dancer

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say aloud "six, seven, eight"; this utterance is the trace of a choreographic enunciation, understood as a pre-ordering of the performance.

The presence of an observer affects the meaning of both space and the actors as much as that of time. Each of these is subject to an enunciative aspectualisation, traces of which the text may retain. The utterances specific to time, space, and the actors are therefore susceptible to aspectualisation.

Although presented as a dictionary, Greimas and Courtés's work was, for semiotic theory, largely forward-looking. By developing the program suggested therein, semioticians have applied an aspectual conception of space not only to novels but also, notably, to works in the visual arts. As one might expect, the ways in which space is observed produce aspects other than those characteristics of time. We observe, for example, that space is either open or closed. This aspectual configuration depends on the observer. If the space has a window, it will tend to be open (visually) to the outside when the observer is inside the space, and closed (physically) if the observer is outside.

Of course, other factors also come into play. But this is not the place to go into the details of the state of the art.[8] Let us simply note that the conception of aspectualisation remains 'a work in progress' for semiotic theory. It is fairly advanced with regard to space, dependent on linguistic conceptions with regard to time, and has remained in limbo with regard to actors. In any case, it fits easily into a semiotics of practices (Fontanille 2008), as suggested by existing research and as anticipated by the semiotics of the observer developed by Fontanille (1989).

My contribution in this domain has primarily consisted of developing the concept of *aspectuality*, which, by virtue of its formal status, is capable of supporting the enunciative and interpretive functions resulting from aspectualisation. Aspectuality can be defined as a stable structure linking an observing subject with a temporal, spatial, or actorial object. This relationship is constituted in three ways: by a *direction* in which the subject aims at an object; by a *position* that, in turn, situates the subject in relation to that object; and by a *momentum* (*élan*) that characterises the observer as the subject vis-à-vis the observed object even before it is brought into their presence. Furthermore, this object is itself characterisable, by a mirror effect, as the object, according to an *order of repetition* when it defines a temporality, a *dimensional number* when it defines a spatiality, and a *bodily operator* when it defines an actor. Each of these categories allows for the definition of "polarised" aspects, with every aspect tending to signify the opposite of another.[9] Thus, this theoretical proposition advocates for a relational (dynamic) and differential (structural) conception of aspect.

[8] I have presented this state of the art elsewhere (Badir 2017), emphasizing spatial aspectualisation. Regarding a semiotic conception of temporal aspectuality, including the presentation of the four temporalities mentioned above, I would like to refer the reader to another work (Badir 2024); as well as to a third work on the aspectuality of actors (Badir 2021).

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Hopefully, these elements of a theory still in its experimental stage suffice to provide a framework for describing the various spatialities observed by the viewer of *Rosas danst Rosas*, which I now address by seeking to identify the aspectual characterisations of the choreography.

The space of *Rosas danst Rosas*

Suppose that at the beginning of a performance, six or eight dancers enter the stage, disperse, and wait for the start of a musical phrase before beginning to dance. This is a common (perhaps outdated) device that aligns the formal space of the dance with the concrete space of the stage. This space is, for the most part, a surface, a two-dimensional space. Certainly, the bodies move within a volume (and they are themselves volumes), but dance choreography, more often than not, makes relatively little use – or uses them only to a rather limited extent[10] – of the characteristics of the surrounding three-dimensional space (unlike circus acts, for example), and instead explores movement on a plane extensively.

The spatial arrangement in *Rosas danst Rosas* is significantly different. It appears linear, that is, as a one-dimensional space. Four dancers enter from the back of the stage and line up, standing an arm's length apart from one another. Soon they fall abruptly: the entire first part of the dance takes place in this lying position, without ever breaking the initial linear arrangement.

What happens to this line – as a choreographic form that defines the space of dance – can be described in terms of the aspectual characteristics that an observer, in this case the audience, assigns to a one-dimensional space. Let us begin by examining it in terms of the momentum that animates the subject. The dance line is first viewed in its entirety, as a segment. And it is worth noting in this regard that the line formed by the alignment of the dancers does not distribute them across the entire width of the stage; the delimitation of the segment is therefore independent of this. Soon, however, the gaze is invited to move from one dancer to another, to *follow* the line they form. The line comes to life, so to speak. This orientation of the gaze depends directly on the choreographic composition: time inscribes its order onto the line. What might have been described as the series "AAAA, BAAA, BBAA, BBBA, BBBB, BBBC," and so on, can be specified by the order of appearance in the spatial line (and no longer merely as the abstract structure of a series): "AAAA, B^{1st}AAA, $B^{1st}B^{2nd}$AA, $B^{1st}B^{2nd}B^{3rd}$A, $B^{1st}B^{2n}B^{3rd}B^{4th,}$ $BBBC^{1st}$…" As a result, the gaze is led to move from one dancer to

[9] The overarching theoretical framework of this proposal is indebted to Claude Zilberberg's (2006) tensional semiotics, itself inspired by Hjelmslev's theory of language.

[10] Whatever the desire. De Keersmaeker (2020: 21) recounts an anecdote in which Trisha Brown, when asked by a journalist what she considered the most beautiful of movements, reportedly replied: flying.

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another, from left to right. During the execution of movement C, the direction is reversed, from so that the gaze moves from right to left: "BBBB, BBBC^{1st}, BB$C^{2nd}C^{1st}$, B$C^{3rd}C^{2nd}C^{1st}$, $C^{4th}C^{3rd}C^{2nd}C^{1st}$…," thus creating a "sweep" across the line.

Let us now consider the aspects related to the orientation of the observer facing this line. The line can be seen as either continuous or discontinuous. Here again, the materiality of the bodies is not decisive. For example, the skyline of a metropolis appears continuous, even though it is a broken line and, if we were to consider each building that makes it up, we would have to admit that it is discontinuous. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, discontinuity is signified by the regular interval maintained between the dancers. In the third and fourth parts, their complex movements across the stage do not compromise the discontinuity of their alignment. Thus, the choreography inscribes its compositional principle into space: cells of movement arranged in an increasingly sophisticated manner yet remaining identifiable at all times in their cellular integrity. There is, however, a particular gesture that invites the observer to make the line continuous. This is a "nodding" glance that the dancers exchange with one another, in pairs, in a sequenced manner – that is, as a movement in its own right (composed of four beats). This exchanged gaze creates continuity. It is introduced in the first part and takes on its full meaning in the second. Indeed, in the second part, the eleven chairs scattered across the stage are all facing the same direction but form four lines (three consisting of three chairs and one of two) rather than a single line. The nods exchanged by the dancers, each seated in one of these lines, allow the initial line – now traced in a zigzag pattern – to be reconstructed.

Finally, the line positions the observer either as an "eye-mind," when considered in its formal aspect, or as a "sensory eye," when viewed in its material trajectory. It is evident, for example, that the lines painted by Cy Twombly have no meaning unless the viewer scrutinizes them in the tremor of their strokes; conversely, the lines in a Mondrian painting may well have some imperfections, yet they are valued for the ideal-coloured form they compose. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, the lines are ideal. This is what allows its space of dance to manifest itself in varying stage settings, depending on their three-dimensional and two-dimensional configurations, without in any way disrupting the linear structure. In De Mey's film, the importance of the choreographic line is emphasized by lateral tracking shots, as well as by the modernist architecture of the location (the RITO technical school in Leuven) designed by Henry Van de Velde, where the grid of lines is omnipresent (through the cross-bar frames of the large windows, the checkerboard flooring, the rectangular tiles on the lower sections of the walls and on the supporting columns, and even through the metal cladding of the roofs). The perceptible nature of the lines is signified only as enunciative markers, precisely to deny their aspectual significance for the choreography. Thus, in the second part, a dancer pauses in her movements to reposition the chairs, even though the audience has not noticed that they have been moved: this ostension (reprised in the film, thus intended as such) makes sense only to the mind, not to the eye. Other, more incidental

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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enunciative markers seek to produce the same aspectual effect. Thus, marks affixed to the floor for the positioning of the chairs and dancers; like the construction lines visible in Rodin's sculptures, they indicate a formal plan of construction, and this plan is essentially linear. I would also like to mention an incident that occurred during the performance I attended: a dancer interrupted the movement she was executing in order to mark, with an outstretched arm, the distance to be maintained from the other dancers. I do not believe the incident was intentional, but clearly the dancer did not seek to conceal it; on the contrary, she endowed it with a meaning that transcends, precisely, its fortuitous nature. These enunciative traces manifest "departures" from the utterance, which can thus preserve, in its expression, the purity of its choreographic form.

Throughout the piece, the fate of the initial line is to shift and multiply: the emergence of parallel lines (Part 2), orthogonal lines (Part 3), and diagonal lines (Part 4). A formal structure is established based on these lines. Aspectual characteristics played an essential role in this establishment. The animation of the line brought about its displacement. Its discontinuity made orthogonality possible as soon as a dancer inscribed her movement in two lines at the same time, through the pairs she forms with two other dancers, since, as we know, an orthogonal plane requires only three (necessarily "discontinuous") construction points. And, to express diagonality within a plane, an additional point is necessary, which justifies the presence of at least four dancers. Finally, the idealising positioning of the observer allows them to grasp the increasing complexity of the structure of the lines expressed during the unfolding of the choreographic form, whereas an emphasis on the trace of the line would have immediately made them feel the complexity of its variation.

The bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas*

How does the observer perceive the actor? Of the three questions I posed at the beginning of this essay, this is the one for which it is most difficult to arrive at a consensus. Certainly, everyone will agree that *Rosas danst Rosas* features four dancers. But one must be somewhat of a semiotician to consider that the eleven chairs are, too, actors in this performance.[11]

To address this question, I will begin by drawing on the characterization proposed by Susan Leigh Foster (1982: 173) regarding the type of dance she calls "semic dance," a category that clearly includes *Rosas danst Rosas*, as well as De Keersmaeker's works

[11] I would like to point out that for the semiotic observer, the actor does not need to be animate; as long as they have a role to play that can be situated within the framework of an action, they are capable of constituting an actor (Greimas & Courtés 1979: 7). An anecdote recounted by De Keersmaeker illustrates the plausibility of this perspective, however naïve it may be: "I had friends whose daughter had seen a video of Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, and then, one day, this little girl of three or four years old started throwing all the chairs around. My friends asked her, 'But Eugénie, what are you doing?' and she replied, 'I'm dancing'" (2025: 109).

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in general, no less than those by Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer, whom the author cites as examples. In this type of dance, the dancer is viewed as a "moving body." This characterization is sufficient to distinguish semic dance from other types of dances (termed "metaphorical," "iconic," and "emblematic"), in which the dancer is the expression of a personality (a graceful person, a virtuoso, or an experiencer of psychological profundities, respectively). In semic dance, the dancer's expression refers solely to his or her body, and since the body is in motion, it is these movements that are expressed. I find this proposition convincing because, in addition to the clear distinction it draws between different types of dances, it is compatible with aspectual semiotics.

I would nevertheless add this clarification: since, for the semiotician, the notion of the body extends to inanimate objects (which may be mobile), the body in motion in semic dance is a *human* body. This clarification is important: the characterization of being human is what the dancer and the observer share. In all other respects, they differ. The observer's body, for its part, is neutralised. It knows it is capable of being set in motion (the observer is endowed with momentum, as we have seen) but remains in the background, swallowed up in the shadows of the auditorium. Foster offers a bold interpretation of Western theatre which, in my view, would apply better to dance:

> The division of mind and body is replicated in the distinction between auditorium and stage. The stage represents the inner and bodily – that which is felt, the room into which the audience gains a surreptitious view. The auditorium is the outer – the judging and evaluating, mindful public. (Foster 1982: 74)

On stage, everything is expression, nothing but expression, like the materialisation of a "plane of expression" dear to Hjelmslev. To the auditorium belongs meaning, the plane of content, which is the invisible, secret reverse side of the plane of expression. In semic dance, in particular, the division is even more marked, almost positive, since the dancer expresses no interiority and any emotions that may be signified are the sole responsibility of the spectators—and of the choreographer, as well.[12]

We must not caricature; it is merely a matter of describing roles, those of the model dancer and the model spectator. It is evident, for example, that when a dancer manifests the enunciative marks of the choreography, she is not merely a body, for what is delegated to her is the expression of an intention. Nevertheless, the dancer's primary task in a semic performance consists in executing movements that are the expression of a global entity to be signified, namely "the dance" or, at a lower level of generality, a particular choreography.

[12] In her lecture at the Collège de France, De Keersmaeker (2020: 9) uses a beautiful phrase to describe what emerges from her first two works, *Fase* and *Rosas danst Rosas*: a 'somewhat ecstatic quality of energy.' The energy lies with the dancers; the ecstasy – that rapture of the spirit beyond the senses – lies with the choreographer, in her attempt to reconcile the abstract with the concrete, and with the audience members faced with the same choice.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0003 | **punctum.gr**

To continue describing the role of the model dancer in *Rosas danst Rosas*, an aspectual analysis is appropriate. We have already noted one characteristic, as it is immediately apparent to the observer: the body of the dance is multiple; during the performance that serves as the basis for my analysis, in three of the four parts of the choreography, it manifests a corporeality consisting solely of four female bodies. In the remaining part, the second, the multiplicity of the body is enhanced by the presence of chairs. *Eleven* chairs, whereas only four are used by the dancers: a prime number, irreducible, signifying a multiplicity of any kind. (Sometimes the obvious makes sense; it suffices to point it out.)

What are the aspectual characteristics proper to the multiple body? The observer may view this body as a cohesive group or as a collection of individuals – two opposing aspects that position the observer according to the possibilities of integration with respect to it. The observer directs their gaze by seeking within the multiple body either principles of dependence or reasons for autonomy. Finally, if the observer is moved by a keen momentum, they see in the multiple body a dynamic opportunity for differentiation, whereas their passivity will find only sameness there.

Chairs can serve well for testing these aspects. Do they not offer an opportunity to observe a situational identity between the dancers, seated in this second part of the piece, and the audience? Yes, but the chairs on stage are mismatched, whereas the seats in the auditorium (which are therefore not exactly chairs) are identical. Furthermore, their number (eleven chairs) accentuates the heterogeneity of their individuality, just as the audience, among whom the observer is counted, is gathered only for the occasion; from another perspective, however, a spatial order is assigned to these chairs in a way that is significant for the choreography (they form four lines), much like the arrangement – so to speak – of the audience, assembled for a specific purpose. In any case, these observations may make sense to the spectator (principle of dependence) or not (autonomy of the performance with regard to its practical conditions).

The ambivalence of aspectual characterisation is also evident in the dancers and their movements. The sense of relational cohesion grows stronger as the choreography becomes more complex, necessitating the presence of multiple bodies. As long as the dancers perform similar movements – even if out of sync – in an alignment that makes them interchangeable, the opposite impression of a collection remains all the stronger because they do not come into contact with one another (to the point that anyone could be integrated into the dance, as De Keersmaeker suggests for the *Re:Rosas!* project). Certainly, the spectator cannot fail to notice that the movements are coordinated, and is invited to seek out the principle of interdependence (the "structure"). Soon, however, they will observe that one or another dancer is often dissociated from the others, through autonomous movements as well as by her position outside the line. Thus, they

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may wonder – challenging certain preconceptions – whether it is not the group that is capable of producing autonomy, while serial individuation creates dependence. The tension is even greater regarding the latter aspect. Identity of movements within the choreographic form, or continuously differentiating variations? The performance is conceived in such a way that the observer's free will – or their indecision – can swing at any moment from one side to the other.[13]

The aspectual ambivalence of the multiple body is found in many contemporary dance pieces, although the choreography of *Rosas danst Rosas* employs specific ways to express it. It is part of a questioning that the audience is invited to make their own. Foster, in her highly stimulating thesis I have already cited, before turning to dance she develops an extensive reflection on the body and the subject (of which the observer is a case), drawing notably on the experiences of Antonin Artaud, Bunraku theatre (as viewed by Roland Barthes), and the cosmology of the Dogon people studied by Marcel Griaule. This investigation allows the researcher to avoid confining the body to its Western conception, so that contemporary dance may discover a horizon that is not merely aesthetic but also ethical. When she turns to semic dance, she writes:

> The body in the "semic dance" is a *physical* body – the sinew, effort, stretch, sweat, tension, and relaxation of bones and muscles. […] The body expresses these [movements] as an expression of *itself*. By problematizing the production of meaning, the "semic dance" also problematizes the body as a representational model. (Foster 1982: 185)

It seems that aspectual instability is the best indicator of the body's fallibility in fulfilling a representational role. If one is led to constantly hesitate about its characteristics, how could the body represent anything at all? A representational role needs to be supported by conventions. Those of theatre, ballet, or opera are so deeply rooted in the aesthetic tradition that the physical adequacy between the actor and their character may be weak. In the choreography of semic dance, conventions are far fewer, so that the actor – that is, the dancer(s) – is reduced to what their body expresses, but they always do so authentically. They do not represent; they embody. This is the word chosen by De Keersmaeker (2020: 8) when she defines choreography as 'calligraphy of embodiment.'

[13] These aspects are remarkably reinterpreted in the film. For example, in the third part, a dancer, followed by the camera in a lateral tracking shot (starting at the 33rd minute of the film), calmly moves through different rooms where groups of two to four dancers are performing. Her autonomy of movement reinforces, by contrast, the cohesion of each group and invites comparison – potentially revealing differences – as does a wide shot taken from outside the building. The viewer has no choice but to accept a paradoxical vision of the choreography, one that is both partial and multifaceted, as if diffracted through the prism of the windows.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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In conclusion

Although often given to her work, particularly her early pieces, De Keersmaeker treats the label of "minimalism" with caution. If the aim is to highlight the reduction of means (no set or props: a bare stage), one can accept it; though what is important in this regard lies elsewhere, namely in the enunciative traces that the choreography leaves on stage, through the exposure of the backstage area,[14] the marks on the floor, and the instructions expressed gesturally or vocally by one or another dancer. And, if the point is to say that the choreography, when it comes to representing non-danced actions and gestures, sticks to subtle allusions (in *Rosas danst Rosas*, a few gestures related to a woman's daily life, such as adjusting the neckline of a blouse that has slipped off her shoulder), the label of "minimalism" is certainly not the clearest way to describe it.

Since labels are a matter of interpretation, they are open to change. I would like to suggest one that I have not seen used by critics of *Rosas danst Rosas*: that of "constructivism"[15] – at the very least, the anachronism of this label would show that the meaning to be attributed to the piece must be understood within a broad perspective of artistic and cultural traditions. I will highlight the five characteristics of this artistic and architectural movement set out in the manifesto by Naum and Pevsner (1920): (i) an aesthetic based on rhythm and movement; (ii) a taste for structures and geometric abstraction, balanced by an equally strong taste for the dominance of materials, and thus for the embodiment of structures; (iii) the enunciative affirmation of a real space (rather than the representation of an imaginary space); (iv) the setting aside of subjectivity; (v) an aesthetic linked to social life through its extensions into ethics and politics.

My concluding suggestion can only be of a heuristic nature, with a view to a more general interpretation of the work. It is worth noting, as an indication of plausibility, that De Mey and Vermeersch chose Maximalist! as their stage name. This name makes no secret of the influence exerted on them by American minimalist music, but also hints at the contrast they seek to express in relation to it, through the energetic, even frenetic, nature of their compositions (closely coinciding with the temporal aspects of the dance movements in *Rosas danst Rosas*, as De Mey explains[16]). In this regard, an artistic kinship has often been noted with the music of Stravinsky – 'constructivist' in its own way (Vinay 2007) – characterised by compositions with a solid structure that objectify rhythmic and metrical balances.

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[14] This also applies to the film: in a shot with a deep depth of field (at the 19th minute), a dancer is visible, seated at the back of the hall; she watches, like the viewer, the movements performed by the four dancers in the foreground.

[15] I take as a sign that her familiarity with this movement – which, very early on, De Keersmaeker associated in her formative years with the discovery of the minimalist movement in North American contemporary music (see De Keersmaeker 2025: 41) – is not entirely out of place.

[16] https://blindman.be/en/projects/maxmal-blindman. De Mey imbues his compositions with a 'vigorous muscularity.'

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The aspectual analysis developed in this essay also supports the connection with constructivist aesthetics. It shows how the spectator is invited to go beyond appearances and the conventions of representation. The performance does not necessarily have a beginning and an end; the temporality of *Rosas danst Rosas* remains open to further development. Nor does the theatre stage truly constitute the space of dance; the spatiality of the piece is constructed from a linear space and, through measured movements, sets out to conquer the second dimension. Finally, the dance itself is not the work of the four dancers named in the program; it arises from the intentions and instructions of a choreographer for bodies – some human and moving, others inert and inanimate – whose overall cohesion serves to guarantee specific instances of autonomy.

It is up to the audience to bring out the meaning of the work. They achieve this through a process of observation that involves a kind of thoughtful reflection on the signs they perceive, in this respect akin to a phenomenological approach. Marguerite Duras once said that in traditional cinema, the viewer contributes only 20% to the film's meaning, so conventional is it; in her own films, though, she would like to engage 80% of their potential. It seems to me that this applies to contemporary semic dance, particularly to the works of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Observing aspectual characteristics requires effort. And when, during the performance, certain aspects are converted into their opposites, or if they remain ambivalent, the observer's participation in the work's meaning is all the more called upon. The observer is no longer merely an informed judge but also becomes a witness. Through their presence, they bear witness to a new reality.

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Khachaturian's ballet *Gayane* as a metaphor of happiness in a semiotic perspective

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BY: **Inna Merkoulova** and **Tigran Simyan**

ABSTRACT

One of the most famous ballets by the Armenian and Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian is called *Gayane*. The ballet was composed in 1942, and its final piece, the *Sabre Dance*, remains one of the most recognizable works in the world musical heritage. The *Sabre Dance* had a significant influence on the history of 20th-century popular music, and the theme has been repeatedly used in film, television series, and figure skating. However, Khachaturian himself considered the *Sabre Dance* an additional element, introduced into the ballet almost after the score was completed. For the composer, the ballet's inner message as a "path to happiness" was far more important. Since its 1943 premiere, *Gayane* has been successfully performed on leading stages around the world. To understand the secret of the ballet's long-standing success, we propose examining several examples of *Gayane* productions from the perspective of cultural semiotics and the Greimasian and post-Greimasian semiotics. The examples are illustrated with unique archival materials from the Aram Khachaturian House Museum in Yerevan.

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1. Introduction. On dance and happiness

The contemporary Argentine writer Jorge Asís begins his novella *Memory of Milonga* by stating: 'To be honest, the only time I've been happy, I mean truly happy, was at the milonga. Everything else brought me nothing but disappointment and boredom' (Asís 2026:110). For a writer coming from the birthplace of tango and milonga, dance is directly linked to happiness: 'My memories of true harmony and happiness (yes, don't be so afraid of that silly word) are inseparable for me from the image

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of dance. And when I dance, I want to die so I can continue dancing after death' (Asís 2026:110). But how can dance become a metaphor for happiness? In posing this question, we draw on Lakoff and Johnson, who argue that metaphor is not limited to the realm of language; thought processes themselves are largely metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 2004:25). Metaphors are linked to cultural background: the most fundamental cultural values are consistent with the metaphorical structure of a given culture's concepts (ibid. 48).

Conceptualizing dance as metaphor means approaching the discourse of dance as a cultural practice with a *conversation frame*. As contemporary cognitive scientists point out, dance can be construed simultaneously *in physical and dialogic terms*, as a metaphor for *danse-as-conversation* (Pascual and Brandt 2015:1). Dance is presented as a *conversation between the dancer's body and soul, as a dialogue between dancers*, as a story told to the audience, and from this perspective, the metaphor of happiness is part of the 'communicative call and response' (ibid. 9). For Asís, milonga dance becomes a metaphor for happiness thanks to its emotional components, "refuge" and "salvation," which can alleviate the feeling of lack and boredom of everyday life: dance is 'the only place that can shelter and save' (Asís 2026:113).

Should we explain why dance attracts us? Or, together with Crystal Pite, the Canadian choreographer and author of the *Message for International Dance Day 2026*, we can state that dance 'needs no justification or explanation. It is made of us but owes us nothing. It only needs to inhabit a willing body.' For Pite, dance is as natural and inseparable from a person as the concepts of life and love, and we are all dancers: 'Life moves us; life dances us […]. Like life, a dance creates and destroys itself in every moment' (Pite 2026).

To explain dance as a metaphor for happiness is to attempt to "express the inexpressible," to dissect inspiration into its parts, as Yuri Lotman does in his work *Culture and Explosion*, analyzing Alexander Blok's poem *The Artist*. Blok understands creative inspiration as the highest tension, 'tearing a person from the realm of logic into the realm of unpredictable creativity' (Lotman 2004a:27). The artist described by Blok lives in three worlds. The first is the external world, the world beyond poetry. The second world is the world of the poetic "I," its logical and meaningful part. Finally, the third world is the world of poetry itself, immersed in sleep. It awakens when it hears an "unprecedented ringing," that is, at the moment of transition from the world expressed in words to the world beyond the verbal. At this moment, a breakthrough into non-time occurs:

> The hours, bearing the world, continue.
> Sounds, movement, and light expand.
> The past gazes passionately into the future.
> There is no present. There is no weak one. (Blok 1960:145)

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Paolo Fabbri, drawing attention to Lotman's analysis of Blok's poem, notes this key moment of breakthrough, calling it *uchronia*. This time could have been 'momento fondamentale di u-cronia, di fuori-tempo' (Fabbri 2024:169). According to Lotman, Blok managed to describe with exceptional precision the inspiration considered indescribable. The entire creative process is reproduced as a tension that makes the untranslatable translatable (Lotman 2004a:29).

The concept of "inspiration" is interpreted as a transition from untranslatability to translation, so an artist can taboo the word itself, as Pushkin does in *Egyptian Nights*: 'he was a poet, and his passion was irresistible: when such a *filth* (as he called inspiration) came over him, Charsky locked himself in his study and wrote from morning until late at night. He confessed to his friends that only then did he know true happiness' (cit. in Lotman 2004a: 30).

Inspiration as 'such a *filth*' for Pushkin and happiness as a 'silly word' for Asís: the tabooing of both terms conceals the moment of a "semantic explosion" and the crossing of the boundary of unpredictability. In the following lines, Blok describes the translation of inspiration into the language of the logical verbal world as the *imprisonment* of a bird in a cage: 'And I lock in a cage a cold, light, kind, free bird' (Blok 1960:145). In the case of dance, such a translation is the moment when movement takes possession of a *willing body*, that is, the body is thought of as a "container" for being: 'I like to think of the body as a location; a place where being is held and shaped. When we dance, we are profoundly engaged in being there' (Pite 2026).

Pite's interpretation of dance as *engagement in being there* has its roots in the concept of *dance as a worldview*. This understanding was first proposed by the dancer Isadora Duncan, paving the way for 20th-century choreographic experimentation. A similar position was later expressed by the distinguished choreographer Martha Graham: 'The body is what a person lives through' (cit. in Gadas 2025: 7).

Metaphors allow us to 'understand one domain of experience in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 2004:148), and in the case of dance, we are talking about natural types of experience in the form of bodily movements, constructed in a certain aesthetic way. Assuming that dance can become a metaphor for such an abstract concept as happiness, we draw attention to the connection of this concept with the spatial domain in which people live their bodily experience. As noted by Lakoff and Johnson, the fundamental values of our society are not autonomous; they are consistent with metaphors of the type associated with spatial orientation, such as "up-down." Within the framework of what is important to a person, his system of individual values is consistent with the culture's basic orientation metaphors. Types of spatial relationships do not arise randomly, but because a person is characterized by a body of a certain shape, 'interacting with the material world' (Lakoff and Johnson 2004:35).

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One of the striking examples of orientational metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, is the spatial orientation of the concept of *happiness*. In English, this concept is oriented toward the "top" (*Happy is up*), which is evident in phrases like 'I'm feeling up today,' 'My spirits rose,' and 'My spirits sank.' The orientational metaphor has a physical basis: 'a bowed human posture is usually associated with sadness and depression, while an upright posture is associated with a positive emotional state' (Lakoff and Johnson 2004:36). The opposition Happy is up/Sad is down, cited by the authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, places happiness within a coherent system of metaphors, and part of the semantics of the concept of happiness is explained by its role in this system (ibid.42).

Dance can be imagined as a place of transition beyond the boundaries of unpredictability and as a translation of inspiration into the language of bodily movement. This translation lifts us from the boredom of everyday life, providing a sense of "refuge" and "salvation," ultimately leading to a feeling of happiness. As we will see below, the expression of happiness through musical and choreographic means corresponds to various types of orientational metaphor and thus leads us to the question of the role of the body in semiosis, at the moment when an elementary semiotic function is established between the perception of the external (*exteroceptive*) and internal (*interoceptive*) worlds, so that they become the expression and content of a specific semiotic object (Fontanille 2011:11).

What happens when a dance piece is initially conceived as an "expression of happiness" or a "hymn to happiness"? The work of Aram Khachaturian may provide the answer to this question.

Before going on to describe the context of the ballet and the dance text itself, it should be noted that this is how the residents of Old Tiflis lived. Khachaturian, born in Old Tiflis in 1903, found the carnival life of his city in his youth. Like *kinto* and *karachoheli*, street vendors and artisans danced *kintauri dance* while drinking wine, enjoying life, and giving themselves and others a fleeting sense of happiness. This era is represented in well-known visual texts by Pirosmani (Simyan 2026a) and is especially interestingly presented in a short story by the Armenian writer Aghasi Ayvazyan (1925–2007). In the story *Signage Tbilisi*, we learn about the artist Grigor and the "advertiser" of the era. The narrator in the story presents various carnivalized advertising signs of Old Tiflis: "Grigor painted dancing *kinto* above the door of the Kaplo tavern and below it wrote very freely and clearly, joyfully and simply: 'I DANCE // EVERYONE DANCES // IF YOU WANT, LOOK // IF YOU DON'T WANT, DON'T'" (cit. in Simyan 2026a: 158; Simyan 2026b: 151).

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2. From *Happiness* to *Gayane*: How the *Sabre Dance* was invented

One of the most famous ballets by the Armenian and Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978) is called *Gayane*. The ballet was written in 1942, and its final piece, the *Sabre Dance*, remains one of the most recognizable works in the world's musical heritage, along with the folk dances of the highlanders, in particular the *Lezginka*, which combines courageous masculine and tender feminine principles (Papanyan 2026:4). The *Sabre Dance* had a significant impact on the history of 20th-century popular music, with the theme being used repeatedly in films, television series, and figure skating. The opening bars of the *Sabre Dance* were featured on the reverse of Armenian banknotes in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The *Sabre Dance* on the reverse of the Armenian banknote (in circulation from 1998 to 2004)

The ballet's two protagonists, lovers Gayane and Armen, are depicted against the backdrop of Mount Ararat, a symbol of Armenian identity. The folk figures depicted on the banknote are symmetrically intertwined against the relief of Mount Ararat (the peaks of Lesser Sis and Greater Masis). The body of the dancer Gayane rests on the body of the dancer Armen, who holds sabers, symbolizing a model of happiness: a woman seeks support in a man, and he wants to be that support for her. The semantic center of the image is Mount Ararat, which serves as a horizontal support for Armen. The happy harmony of the relationship is expressed on three levels: physical contact, choreographic movement, and the visual background: the mountain as the foundation of happiness. In other words, happiness manifests itself when the lovers support each

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

other and find support in the geographical landscape: the Ararat Valley and Mount Ararat. The visual representation of the *Sabre Dance* on the banknote thus serves as an original semiotic text, conveying the idea of happiness associated with national identity. This perception is replicated at the sonorous level: a potential banknote owner can "remember" the famous melody of the *Sabre Dance* by looking at the musical bars from the score presented next to the dancers.

According to contemporary Armenian composer Tigran Mansuryan, the *Sabre Dance* represents 'a counterpoint between the Armenian wedding dance and the American saxophone, resulting in a very interesting and organic synthesis' (Mansuryan 2003). Mansuryan makes an important remark about Khachaturian's work, based on national motifs, being "transboundary." As the composer of *Sabre Dance* himself noted, 'musical language is created by the people. It creates that unique and sometimes difficult-to-define distinctiveness of the intonational structure of music, which allows us to unmistakably distinguish the nationality of a given work of musical art' (Khachaturian 1972:9). In other words, a talented musician must "hear" the deep rhythms of collective musical creativity to "present" it to their listeners, "beyond borders," as happened in the case of the *Sabre Dance*.

However, Khachaturian himself considered the *Sabre Dance* an additional element, introduced into the ballet almost after the score was completed. In the context of his entire musical oeuvre, he critically called it 'just a button on my shirt' (Khachaturian 1980:69). For the composer, the central idea of ballet as a 'path to happiness' was far more important. According to Khachaturian, dance becomes 'the emotion of thought and the thought of feelings' (cit. in Papanyan 2004:115).

In this sense, the story of the ballet's composition is quite unique. *Gayane* is an unusual case of reworking an original concept with a new title. Khachaturian originally composed a short ballet, *Happiness*, for the Armenian Art Decade held in Moscow in 1939. *Happiness* is the first Armenian national ballet; the composer used national melodies, and the choreographer synthesized classical choreography with elements of folk dance. It was in the ballet *Happiness* that Khachaturian laid down the

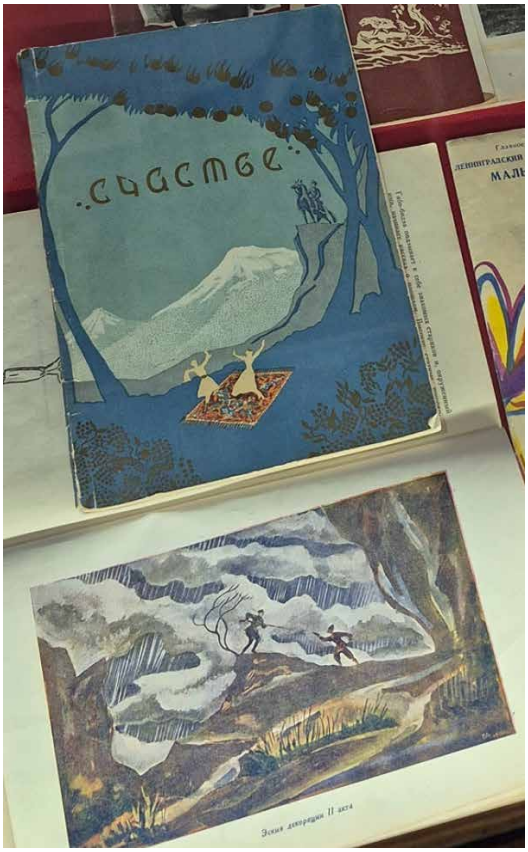


Figure 2. Ballet *Happiness* (1939). Program and sketch of the set for Act II (Khachaturian House Museum in Yerevan).

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fundamental principles of his musical and choreographic aesthetics: 'to symphonize the ballet,' that is, to write it in such a way that folk songs and melodies become an organic fabric of the work, inseparable from all the other music.

The libretto for the ballet *Happiness* was written in the spirit of the era and depicted the lives and work of Soviet border guards and collective farmers. The ballet premiered at the Bolshoi Theater to great acclaim and considerable positive press coverage, but this success was due more to the original music than to the formulaic libretto or the relatively simple choreography. We can judge the choreography today from surviving set sketches and illustrated programs: on stage, the audience witnessed a happy dance between a loving couple and a confrontation between an armed border guard and an enemy who had infiltrated the collective farm (Fig. 2).

According to contemporary music critics, *Happiness* proved to be a 'good stepping stone' or springboard for the further development of Khachaturian's ballet mastery (Fedorov 2002). Soon, the management of the Leningrad Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre (now the Mariinsky Theatre) approached the composer with a proposal to stage *Happiness* with a new libretto. As a result, in Khachaturian's figurative expression, the entire score of *Happiness* was 'destroyed.' In place of the expanded version of *Happiness*, a new ballet *Gayane* was born, named after the main female character (Fig. 3 a, b).



Figure 3a, 3b. Ballet Gayane (1942). Poster, Gayane's costume, archival photos (Khachaturian House Museum in Yerevan).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

The revised version retained some of the plot lines, but the score became significantly more developed symphonically: the imperfection of the first dramatic version turned out to be the very 'springboard from insignificance to meaning' that Algirdas Julien Greimas described in his work *On Imperfection* (Greimas 1987:99; Greimas 2022:95). In this context, it is important to note the transition from a temporary, situationally determined plot constructed in accordance with Soviet ideology to more universal, nationally oriented content related to Armenian culture, expressed through the language of music and dance.

The composer wrote the ballet *Gayane* during World War II, while evacuated to Perm: 'I wrote about 700 pages of the score in six months in a cold hotel room with a piano, a stool, a table, and a bed' (Khachaturian 1980:70). After completing the score and beginning rehearsals, the theater management asked the composer to add one more dance to the final act. The musical masterpiece, which later became known as the *Sabre Dance*, was born 'as if by chance.' Khachaturian wrote it in just a few hours, and a day later, at the dress rehearsal, the dance became an integral part of the ballet *Gayane*. According to the composer, the starting point of his inspiration was the idea of speed and martial spirit:

> The dance had to be fast, martial. My hands, impatiently, struck a chord […]. A start has been made! Now we need contrast… In the third scene of the ballet, I have a melodious theme, a lyrical dance. I combined the martial element with this theme – the saxophone plays it – and then returned to the beginning, but in a new form. (Khachaturian 1980:71)

'Mr. Sabre Dance,' as Khachaturian would later be known abroad, later characterized the *Sabre Dance* as the 'unruly and boisterous child' in his 'musical family' (Khachaturian 1980:71). On the score of the so-called "additional" dance, Khachaturian wrote with emotion: 'Damn it, for the sake of the ballet!' and, already at the dress rehearsal, the dance immediately 'impressed the ballet, the orchestra, and those present in the hall' (Khachaturian 1980:71).

The *Sabre Dance* is based on the traditional Armenian dance *Trahag* (meaning "dance with sabres" in Armenian: թրախաղ), originally performed by men as a ritual rite to inspire courage and raise the spirits of warriors before battle.[1] In the *Trahag* dance, the dancer had to simultaneously mimic the movements of a combat encounter with an enemy and demonstrate their skill with a weapon: one or more sabers. When performed in a group, the dancers were divided into two groups: one row of dancers would attack and pursue, while the other would retreat and defend.

[1] See the book Ancient Armenian Dances for details (Lisitsian 1983).

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Figure 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e. The *Sabre Dance*. Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater, May 2026
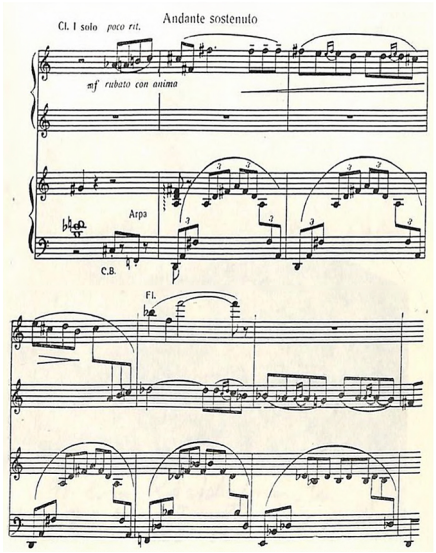








Figure 4g. Score by Gayane, quoted by Tigranova 1972

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

In Khachaturian's ballet, dance accompanies a scene in which warriors demonstrate their skill and prowess with weapons in hand. The dancers' forward and sideways movements convey an attack on the enemy, while their backward movements convey defense (Fig. 4a). The action taking place on stage during the *Sabre Dance* demonstrates Greimas's idea of comparing a simple sentence to a theatrical performance: the actors change, but the sentence-performance remains unchanged, its permanence guaranteed by the same distribution of roles (Greimas 1966:73; Greimas 2000:155). Reflecting on actantial models, Greimas refers to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Fairy Tale* (Propp 1928) and the latter's seven-character scheme, as well as to a similar set of dramatic functions proposed by Etienne Souriau for the analysis of theatrical action. Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* is a choreographic statement that incorporates both genres that interested Greimas: fairy tale and theatrical production. According to Greimas's typology, the communicative actants (actants of enunciation) in the *Sabre Dance* represent interlocutors participating in the structure of a 'second-level conversation, that is, a dialogue' (Greimas and Courtés 1993:3). A special role is given to the appearance of a female character in the traditionally male martial dance: the lyrical theme from the ballet's third scene, performed on the saxophone, introduces the woman onto the stage as the 'sought-after character,' according to Propp, or the 'Bearer of the Desired Good,' according to Souriau (Souriau 1943:157). Here we have the actantial class "Subject – Object," identified on the basis of the category "Desire" (Greimas 2000:159), which is further manifested in the practical and mythical form of "Search" (Fig. 4b).

The premiere of *Gayane* took place in late 1942 at the Perm Opera and Ballet Theater. According to Dmitri Shostakovich, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, in the ballet *Gayane* Khachaturian demonstrated 'genuine nationality, enriched by the heights of world culture and making a new and valuable contribution to world culture' (Shostakovich 1972:42). The ballet brought Khachaturian worldwide fame and recognition, while the *Sabre Dance* effectively took on a life of its own.

The ballet *Gayane* has undergone several revisions: from the 1942 premiere at the Leningrad Opera and Ballet Theater with the choreographer Nina Anisimova and a libretto by Konstantin Derzhavin (Figures 3a and 3b) to the mid-1950s versions, when the ballet was staged at the Bolshoi Theater. In 1957, Aram Khachaturian rewrote more than half of the ballet score based on a new libretto by Boris Pletnev. While in the first version of *Gayane*, most of the dance numbers were devoted to the story of the harvest, the fight against saboteurs on an Armenian collective farm, and the beginning of a new working life for the main character, the new libretto emphasized the characters' storylines in search of love and happiness. Today, the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theatre is showing Vilen Galstyan's 1974 production, in which the appearance of a woman in the *Sabre Dance* has its own history: for a tour at the Paris Olympia in the 1960s, Galstyan composed a separate performance based on the *Sabre Dance* in partnership with the Uzbek dancer Galiya Izmailova: 'I told her that I would dance the first part, she would dance

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the second, and in the third we should be together […]. We exchange blows with swords and sabers, then she throws swords, surrenders […]. Thus, a love duet is born' (cit. in Vladislavskaya 2026). In the current version of *Gayane*, the "feminine" lyrical theme of the *Sabre Dance* is duplicated by a color contrast: female and male characters in white enter the stage; they no longer exchange sword blows, but instead become a single, tense female-male center of the fragment, located within a circle of kneeling warrior-dancers.

In our opinion, the creation of the ballet *Gayane* exemplifies the semiotic phenomenon of "lost" or "alternative" paths, which interested Yuri Lotman in the context of cultural semiotics. In his programmatic article "People and Signs," he drew attention to the fact that information should be understood broadly, as any structural organization. In this sense, information should be considered not only what we have learned but also what we can learn: 'an unread book, an undiscovered star' (Lotman 2004b:9). The original ballet *Happiness* became the "seed" of the future masterpiece called *Gayane*: the schematic libretto and choreography of "*Happiness*" from 1939 already contained everything Khachaturian was able to write in 1942. The idea of the first ballet as a "path to happiness" became a message that audiences understood even without being familiar with the history of *Gayane*'s creation. Thus, the ballet evolved from a "repetition" to a creative "reproduction" (De Luca 2021a). *Gayane*, therefore, represents an example of the continuous 'search for a new cultural form' and 'true expression' within the traditional stage space (Merkoulova and Merkoulova 2022: 83; Merkoulova 2022:274).

The *Sabre Dance* is not the only movement in the ballet inspired by folk dance motifs. Among the popular dance movements, which the composer repeatedly reworked into musical suites after the production of *Gayane*, are, for example, the Dance of the Friends and the slow female dance of the bride, *Uzundara*. However, it was the *Sabre Dance*, an "additional" element "introduced at the last moment," that became the quintessence of the original concept: the search for happiness as a "suspended moment." As Paolo Fabbri writes, Lotman, reflecting on so-called "lost paths," did not become lost within the theory of "possible worlds," but managed to create a balance between uchronia and utopia: 'fa proprio il pensiero delle ucronie e delle utopie, delle strade perdute' (Fabbri 2024:172).

The *Possible World* of the first ballet *Happiness* was further developed in the second ballet, *Gayane*, and found its concentrated embodiment in the *Sabre Dance*. The choreography of the latter, as we will see below, represents an orientational metaphor of happiness. In the visual example we provided at the beginning (Fig. 1), the first musical bars of the *Sabre Dance* accompany the image of the loving couple, the main characters of the ballet *Gayane*, swords in hand. This is no coincidence: although in the musical and choreographic fabric of the ballet, the female character appears only in the second part of the *Sabre Dance*, as conceived by Galstyan, in the minds of the audience the core of the visual image is the orientational metaphor 'to be at the peak of happiness' (*Happy is up*). The male and female characters form a regular triangle

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

with the sword-peak in the foreground of Fig. 1, and this plane is in superposition with the background, offering the viewer the peaks of Mount Ararat.

We all dream of happiness, even if only for a moment, within uchronia. In the original short ballet, the concept of happiness was presented as a serene working life on a Soviet collective farm, arriving after a series of trials. In the new ballet *Gayane*, happiness moves from the collective world to the individual: the main character, the beautiful girl Gayane, finds true love, and the action ends with a wedding, as it should be in a fairy tale.

Combining 'two micro-universes,' a fairy tale and a theatrical performance (Greimas 2000:159), both ballets represent the path to happiness through variations of *semiotic existence* (Greimas and Courtés 1993:138). In the ballet *Happiness*, we observe *actualized existence* (happiness is named), as well as the paths to its practical realization (*realized existence*: working life on a collective farm). In the ballet *Gayane*, the term "happiness" disappears from the title (*virtualized existence*). However, the path to it becomes the basis for the characters' behavior on stage, thus representing a *potentialized existence.* In *Gayane*, as a choreographic enunciation about happiness, modes of semiotic existence become *modalities of presence in discourse* (Fontanille 1999:64).

3. *Gayane* today: Scenography, actants, and passions

In 2026, the ballet *Gayane* is part of the repertoire of the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater, featuring sets designed by the distinguished artist Minas Avetisyan (1928–1975). The sets, created for the 1974 production, not only reflect the artist's unique style, at the intersection of Fauvism and Art Nouveau, but also create a unique space, simultaneously landscape-specific (the mountains of Armenia) and idyllic (a space of happiness). The rich colors of Avetisyan's sets create a world "on the border" between the real and the imaginary, the actualized and potentialized modes of existence (Fig. 5 a, b, c, d).

According to Yuri Lotman, our everyday life seems to us the only possible one. Nevertheless, what if we imagine it as *one of the possible ones*? In artistic creation and in fictional texts, such attempts are constantly made. However, Lotman notes, we fantasize, but we fantasize too little. Everything we invent about the future is 'a very, very multiplied present' (Lotman 2005:270). It is difficult to break away from the present, so our ideas about the future differ more in quantity (increased human abilities) than in quality (something completely different, unlike what we already have). Much more promising would be works that show the viewer a real situation, but at the same time present it as one of the possible. As a result, the viewer or reader gets a sense of the 'infinite variability of the world' and unpredictable creative solutions (ibid.).

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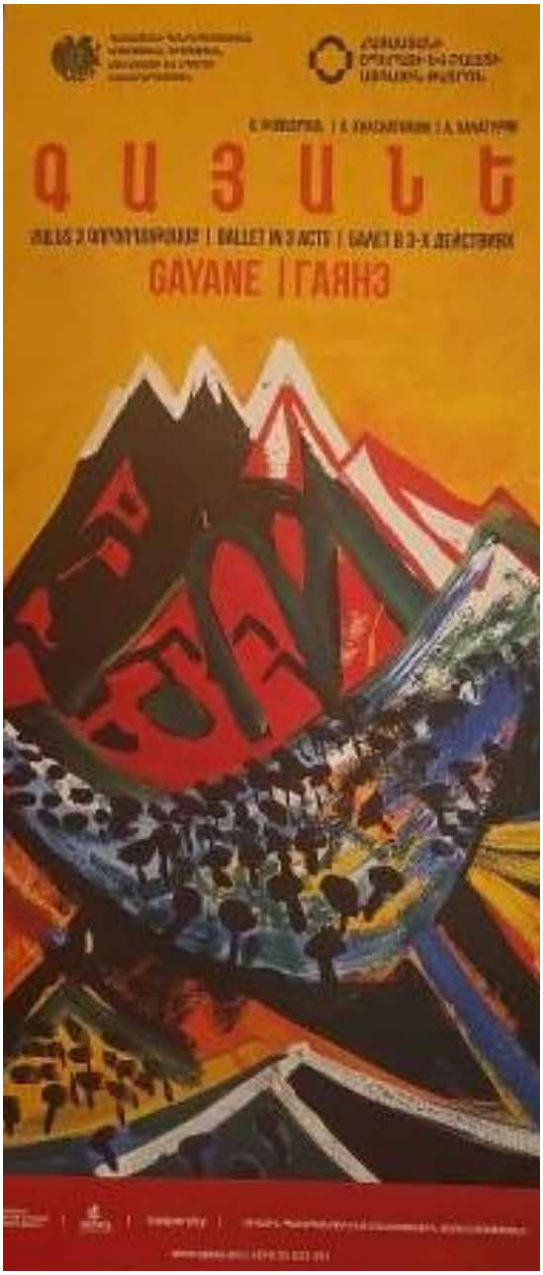


Figure 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d. Set designs by Minas Avetisyan for the ballet *Gayane* and the performance program. Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater, May 2026

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**



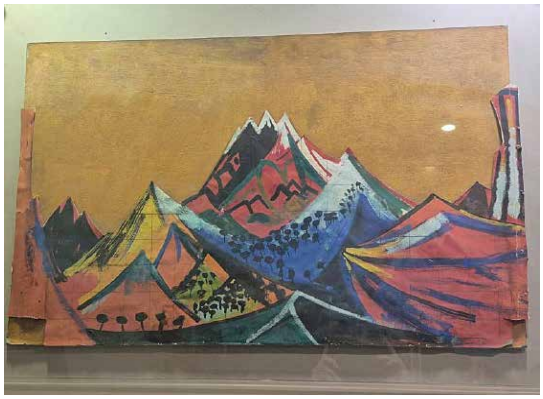




Figure 6a, 6b, 6c. Sketches of Minas Avetisyan's sets at the Khachaturian House Museum in Yerevan

The "possible" or "potential" happy space of the ballet *Gayane*, suggested by Avetisyan's sets, presents the landscape not simply as a location at the foot of the actual Mount Ararat (Fig. 6 a, b, c), as was the case with the design of the ballet *Happiness* (Fig. 2). Avetisyan' s images serve to 'camouflage the visible and reveal the invisible' (Matozzi 2010), moving, in Klinkenberg's terminology, 'from the naked eye to the equipped eye' (Klinkenberg 2010:186).

As Klinkenberg notes, one of the scientific themes that interested Algirdas Julien Greimas in the 1970s, but which was unfortunately not subsequently developed, was the *semiotics of the natural world*. In this project, Greimas proposed to interpret the world not as an absolute referent, but as a site of *manifestation* of the "sensible," which can become a manifestation of human meaning (Greimas 1970:52). In other words, objects of the natural world should be constituted as 'human objects, that is, meaningful for humans' (ibid.). According to Klinkenberg, an image is a tool that tells us as much about the sender and the recipient of the image as it does about the real

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(Klinkenberg 2010:190). In the case of the ballet *Gayane*, Avetisyan's sets are tools that transport both the senders (the artist and composer) and the recipients (the dancers and the audience) into the Armenian mountain landscape of the Shirak region. In the subsequent depiction of the ballet on the Armenian banknote, the dancers Armen and *Gayane* are depicted against the backdrop of the biblical Mount Ararat, the site of humanity' s happy salvation and the birth of new life. In other words, the cultural and musical context has given space to the biblical and sacred (Fig. 6 a, b, c).

The orientational metaphor *Happy is up* is visually represented by Avetisyan as a multi-peaked mountain landscape, simultaneously concrete and idyllic. In the collective monograph *Semiotics of Images*, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou proposed applying Greimas's concept of isotopy to the analysis of figurative images. According to her, unlike verbal text, where isotopies *unfold gradually*, in a painting all isotopes are simultaneously present, thus creating a *visual syntax* (Boklund-Lagopoulou 2025:192). Avetisyan's sets are syntactically constructed around the main thematic isotopies of mountain vs. valley and up *vs*. down, corresponding to the orientational metaphor and the opposition *Happy is up*/*Sad is down*. We share Boklund-Lagopoulou's view that it is impossible to define pictorial signs in the same way we define words in verbal language, yet humans can *recognize* objects in the natural world. However, with visual images, the important thing is not what we recognize, but what we *learn*, culturally or socially, through these images (ibid.193).

Khachaturian's ballet in its 1974 version, according to the choreographer Galstyan, is a 'modest' version in terms of plot, free of ideological encumbrances (cit. in Vladislavskaya 2026). At the same time, it is precisely this modest version that allows the picturesque nature of Khachaturian's music to be highlighted. It is no coincidence that the renowned Armenian artist Martiros Saryan, who held the composer's work in high regard, resorts to artistic terms such as *palette*: 'What is valuable is not only that the composer nurtured his palette with the treasures of folk music […]. For me, the greatest merit of his art lies in the generalized recreation of the image of the people, in the inspiredly captured characterization of native nature and the national spirit' (Saryan 1972:37).

Thanks to Avetisyan's design, the ballet's title takes on a new meaning. While reworking the ballet score, Khachaturian abandoned the abstract concept of *Happiness* in the 1939 title and opted for the female name *Gayane* in the 1942 ballet. In the 1974 production with Avetisyan's sets, the name Gayane is no longer simply the name of the protagonist, who ultimately finds happy love. Gayane is a popular Armenian name with Greek roots, translated as "earthly" or "earth," after the Greek goddess of the earth, Gaya. There are also theories about the Latin origin of the word, which combines two meanings: "gaianus", made of earth, and the late Romance variant "gai," joyful. Gayane is also the name of a revered Armenian saint of the 4th century. Some studies link this name to folk roots meaning "home" or "family." Thus, the entire ballet *Gayane* becomes a coherent enunciation about finding happiness and love as a "homecoming" to one's native land.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

In his articles, Khachaturian writes about the path to happiness as part of a young person's development: 'The life that surrounds us is infinitely rich […]. Furthermore, I would like to call on our youth to tirelessly strive for the new, to listen sensitively to the voice of the people, to study life, to draw inspiration from the struggle of the peoples of the world for truth, for happiness' (Khachaturian 1972:21). According to his axiology, in addition to cognitive aspirations (studying life, listening to the voice of the people), the world of youth should also be filled with the desire for happiness. From this perspective, the ballet *Gayane* occupy a special place in the composer's creative legacy.

On the one hand, *Gayane* can be interpreted through the actantial model of Greimas (2000:153) where we consider the relationships of the characters based on axes, constant relationships based on the interaction of desire, value communication and conflict. The plot of the ballet Gayane is built around the struggle to restore the disturbed order, where love becomes not only a personal feeling, but also a cultural value recognized by the team.

On the axis of desire, Armen is the central subject. It is he who is the bearer of directed action and strives to possess the object of Gayane's love and unite with her in a harmonious union. However, the object here is not limited solely to a romantic feeling. Armen and Gayane's love is semiotically encoded at the moral and social levels. That's why their future marriage will be like a sign of harmonious homeostasis. At the same time, Gayane herself partially occupies a subjective position, since her aspiration is also aimed at preserving love, freedom and inner harmony. Thus, the axis of desire acquires a mutual character, where both characters are included in the general movement towards unity.

The axis of communication and values reveals a deeper level of the work. The harmonious union of Armen and Gayane becomes the object of communication, while the recipient is not only the lovers themselves, but also the entire rural Armenian community. This is especially noticeable in the ballet's finale, where the wedding turns into a collective celebration. Songs, dances and the participation of the entire traditional Armenian village show that the happiness of the heroes is perceived as the restoration of a common order. Thus, love receives public recognition and turns into a sign of collective harmony.

On the axis of struggle and conflict, the confrontation between Armen and his rival, the jealous Giko, becomes the most important. Armen is supported by helpers, friends, and villagers. In the plot, Giko acts as an opponent and a destabilizing actor. His feelings for Gayane are based on the desire for possession. Unrequited love gradually transforms into envy, aggression, and a desire for revenge. Gayane's abduction becomes the culmination of the destruction of a harmonious order. Giko turns out to be the bearer of a chaotic principle, opposed to the village's collective ethics.

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The semiotic juxtaposition of Armen and Giko is constructed as a conflict of two value models. Armen is associated with love, honesty, teamwork, and creation, while Giko is associated with violence, selfishness, and destruction. If Armen strives for a harmonious union recognized by society, then Giko tries to appropriate the object of desire forcibly. That is why Armen's victory in the final is interpreted not only as the hero's personal happiness. In the deep structure of the ballet, a universal mythological scheme is reproduced: the initial harmony is disrupted, the world goes through a crisis and a test, after which order is restored: destruction of homeostasis / harmony – conflict – restoration of harmony / homeostasis. The final wedding of Armen and *Gayane* becomes a sign of the victory of love, collective solidarity and moral justice.

Summarizing the above, we can conclude that the ballet *Gayane* functions as a semiotic text in which the personal story of the characters becomes a model for restoring social and cultural integrity, told through music and dance.

On the other hand, we propose examining the structure of the ballet *Gayane* not only as stages of a narrative journey of trials, but also through the prism of the semiotics of passions. Each stage represents the "imprint" of dysphoric or euphoric events, ultimately leading to a happy outcome. The story of Gayane (Galstyan's version, currently performing in Yerevan) is, at first glance, a classic love triangle: a pair of lovers, the beautiful Gayane and Armen, and the jealous Giko, who unsuccessfully tries to thwart their happiness. However, as Jacques Fontanille points out, citing Lévi-Strauss's work on the jealous potter (Lévi-Strauss 1985:59), the "affective" or "family" plot may represent a "miniature" of the larger cosmic conflicts represented in the myths of a given culture (Fontanille 2010:145). The mythical dimension of Gayane's story is divided into the same two components that the authors of *Semiotics of Passions* (Greimas and Fontanille 1991) identified in their analysis of jealousy: 1. conflicts, battles, cosmic and chthonic quarrels, corresponding to the *configuration of rivalry*, 2. self-control, attitude towards one's own body and objects of desire, corresponding to the *configuration of attachment*.

The first act illustrates the configuration of rivalry: Gayane 'dances in her moments of rest' after a hard day's work, the enamored Armen 'can't take his eyes off her,' and his rival, Giko, tries to win her heart, but fails, and 'anger and despair settle in his heart.' The second act demonstrates the configuration of affection, both at the level of love and at the level of solidarity: Armen and Gayane 'enjoy love' in the mountains, Giko kidnaps the girl, but Armen manages to get her back, with the help of 'all the outraged villagers.' Finally, the third act represents the *resolution of the tension through a canonical sequence*: Giko 'cannot bear' the outrage of his fellow villagers, Gayane and Armen have a joyful wedding, and 'the whole village shares their happiness' (Libretto Gayane 2026).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

Through musical and choreographic means (the conflict between lyrical and martial musical themes, the varied bodily expressions of affectivity), *Gayane* achieves one of the goals outlined in works preceding the semiotics of passions, in particular, *Fragments of a Lover's Speech* (Barthes 1977): how to talk about subjectivity without letting it slip away, how to "grasp" the vibration of emotion without falling into the trap of cognitive judgment or cultural schemas.

In the *Sabre Dance*, the idea of the path to happiness and its attainment is embodied through the orientational metaphor *Happy is up*. The fast first part of the *Sabre Dance* is the men's dance. It imitates a battle, with dancers spinning with weapons in their hands, where sabers, raised vertically, demonstrate prowess, courage, and victory over an opponent through a series of leaps (Fig. 4c). The slower choreography of the second part marks the entrance of a female character: the dancer carries the upright dancer Gayane to the center and smoothly lowers her onto the stage (Fig. 4d), where she demonstrates a series of *attitude* poses (*attitude devant, attitude derrière*: the dancer stands on one supporting leg, while the other, working leg, is raised and held in a bent position). The *attitude* pose, invented by choreographer Carlo Blasis, evokes the image of the graceful statue of the flying god Mercury by the sculptor Giambologna (1564, a version of the sculpture is housed in the Louvre).[2] The visual emphasis of the attitude pose is the creation of soft, round, and voluminous lines (Fig. 4e).

By examining this example, we recognize the so-called linguistic dimension of dance, noted by Valeria De Luca when she writes about the complex dynamic relationship between gesture and language. Postures as *dansèmes* or predetermined figures (*attitude* or elements of folk dance with weapons) are inscribed within a field of morphogenetic activity, as René Thom (1990) puts it. The latter 'constantly renews the stakes of valences and values, the salient features and the pregnancies by modulating them, by putting them into variation' (De Luca 2021b:67).

In the *Sabre Dance*, the appearance of a female dancer who "descends to the ground" embodies the orientational metaphor of *happy is up*. When dancing with sabers, Armen enters the stage with Gayane, holding her high on her head. He introduces her as a "trophy of happiness," and the continuation of individual elements of the Gayane dance steps refers to joyful movements, indirectly pointing to the *quinto* steps (Simyan 2019: 63), street vendors of the City of Tbilisi in the 19th century.[3]

As noted in several comparative studies devoted to the expression of happiness in different cultures, happiness can take the form of an anthropomorphic metaphor: it is 'an independent and autonomous agent' (Mozol 2018: 101) and 'comes from above'

[2] Mercury, attributed to Giambologna, MR 3271. Department of Medieval, Renaissance and Modern Sculpture, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010092360

[3] About the Old Tiflis discourse, see the latest research: Simyan 2020, Simyan 2023, Mechitov 2025.

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(Bagautdinova and Bayramova 2006: 67). Classifying metaphors of happiness in relation to human actions, researchers distinguish the following vertical movements in space: 'happiness has arrived,' 'happiness has sat on my windowsill,' 'happiness stood and smiled at him' (Mozol 2018:101). '*Happiness* smiled' and 'to be born under a lucky star' are expressions known in Armenian (Sukiasyan and Galstyan 1975:221) and Russian (Larionova 2014:355). The *lucky star*, embodied by the dancer, is a reward for the valor of the saber dancers, since 'fortune favors the brave' (Bagautdinova and Bayramova 2006:64). As the authors of the dictionary *Myths of the Peoples of the World* point out, the expression 'to be born under a lucky star' goes back to the most ancient mythological form of understanding the world and the archetypal oppositions *top/bottom, heavenly/earthly* (astral myths). The image is based on a metaphor that likens good fortune to being born under a lucky star, that is, one located in the center of the sky and predetermining a happy fate (Tokarev 1980: 97). Therefore, the choice of a series of attitude poses (this particular pose of the dancer is depicted on Armenian banknotes, Fig. 1) by choreographer Vilen Galstyan alludes simultaneously to the "divine" nature of happiness and its fleeting nature (the flying god).

The choreography of the *Sabre Dance* is also reinforced by visual contrast: the dark costumes of the male warriors vs. *Gayane*'s white attire. *VERTICALITY, STRAIGHT, and BALANCE*, demonstrated by the dancers, contrastingly dressed in white, represent the primary "body-inherent schemas" that underpin the various meanings, literal and metaphorical, of the verb *stand*. These schemas have been found to combine in different ways, thus underpinning various related meanings, both literal and metaphorical, of the polysemous verb stand (Mittelberg 2018:9). In the context of the ballet *Gayane*, *to stand* is synonymous with to strive upward, toward happiness, that is, to move 'through movement toward history' (Maiorani 2022:5).

As repeatedly noted by music theorists, the musical language of the ballet *Gayane* is mainly characterized by its profound lyricism. 'Gayane is one of the most lyrical ballets of our time. In this regard, Khachaturian follows the traditions of Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev. This is evident in many ways, including in the central, pervasive role of the lyrical image, in the methods of its preparation and development, and, crucially, in the very interpretation of the danceability of the music' (Tigranova 1972:229). The music is 'permeated with the lyrical enunciation' of Gayane: we constantly hear her leitmotif, dialogic motifs from the invention, phrases from the lullaby. The ballet's final section prepares for the 'bright, major intonations' that 'fully blossom' in the final act (ibid. 237). Here, 'the idea of the inseparability of personal interests from the interests of society is finally fulfilled'; a happy life, the joy of labor, and the abundance of nature's gifts are celebrated. Gayane's fate and the happiness she finds are the *culmination of life's struggle*. In the final act, Gayane's theme is given in *Andante sostenuto* tempo (Fig. 4g): 'smooth, arpeggiated accompaniment

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

of the harp, octave leaps in the melody, expansion of the range, soft graceful second glides,' a gentle refrain, an unusually fresh and bright juxtaposition of major and minor (*D-dur/b-moll*) – all this creates 'a surprisingly harmonious image of unclouded happiness' (ibid. 240).

Using Tarasti's terminology, we can characterize the music of *Gayane* as *organic music*, a metaphor for happiness found in one's native land, embodied both in the title (*Gayane* means *earthly* and *joyful*) and in the natural development of the lyrical enunciation, drawing on folk elements: 'There are two kinds of music: organic and inorganic. In the former, the listener identifies music as a kind of *living organism* that imitates *natural processes*, and by such identification participates in the experience of unity. The opposite holds true in inorganic music, such as that written using serial or other "pre-programmed" techniques. Inorganic music emphasizes man's separation from nature' (Tarasti 2002: 17). Organicity, a folk basis, and symphonicity were the main principles of Khachaturian's work throughout his life: 'What is dearer to me is the principle of bold, creative handling of folk melody, when the composer uses folk melody as a life-giving seed that can be freely and boldly developed, processed, and enriched' (Khachaturian 1972:10).

The ballet invites us to immerse ourselves in the *tensivo-phoric space* of the path to happiness as the space of the *precondition of meaning* (Fontanille 2026: 6). Phoria, located at a deeper level than narrativity and semantic categorization, is polarized into euphoria and dysphoria and reformulated in terms of the modalization of existence (*desirable, possible*). Tensivity, for its part, is based on the relations of *intensity* (force, energy, affect) and extensity (quantity, deployment, space, and time: Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998).

In our view, *Gayane* offers a promising analysis in light of recent work on bodily semiotics, as an example of musical-choreographic 'testimony.' The body 'becomes necessary' as soon as we ask what unites the two planes of language into a single meaningful ensemble (Fontanille 2011: 4). The body as a substrate of profound semiotic operations, on the one hand, and the *figures of the body* that appear in semiotic objects, on the other, lead us to a *generative path of signification* that is not formal and logical, but phenomenal and embodied. The elementary semiotic function is inextricably linked to the bodily distinction between one's own and not one's own, and this distinction operates within the body itself, giving rise to the concept of the *body-actant*. The latter concept includes the actant as body (where the actant ceases to be purely formal and depends on bodily features, matter, and energy) and the body as actant (where it is either the instance of the enunciation or the narrative actant). Within the body-actant, a distinction is made, firstly, between the actant's *flesh*, a material substance endowed with transformative energy, underlying deixis and the sensorimotor core of semiotic experience. Secondly, a distinction is made between

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the *body itself*, that is, the identity that is constructed in the process of semiosis: 'The body itself would therefore be the bearer of identity in construction and becoming, and it would obey a guiding force.' (ibid. 13). In analyzing the ballet *Gayane*, we speak of bodies-actants that 'experience pressures' from the external world, contrasting this with 'identity in the process of becoming' (ibid. 17). Sensori-motricity is capable of imparting an *axiological orientation* to our relationship with the world as a whole (ibid. 18), and this is the reason why happiness as a metaphor is embodied in choreographic movement and gesture.

The ballet *Gayane* narrates the *subject's modal existence* (Greimas 1983: 93), where the two poles of phoria, namely euphoria and dysphoria, are transformed into *modalities of existence*: desired/undesired (desired love for Giko – undesired for Gayane: *vouloir-être*), necessary/harmful (labor in the village – shirking work: *devoir-être*), possible/impossible (the abduction and return of the beloved: *pouvoir-être*). The body is capable of storing, as part of its figurative memory, traces and imprints of its interactions with other bodies. Therefore, it can be assumed that every subject of enunciation, who enunciates precisely because he or she is a body-actant, can bear witness to his or her experience. This means that 'every embodied enunciation necessarily carries within itself a part of testimony' (Fontanille 2011: 119).

In the ballet, the path to happiness through trials lies through a combination of ethos and pathos. The roles of the lead dancers (Gayane, Armen, and Giko), as well as the collective *Sabre Dance*, are interpreted as 'pathetic proofs,' and their bodies as witness bodies (Fontanille 2010: 138): the co-presence on stage of living and feeling bodies that share the same experience and emotions is one of the conditions for "convincing" the audience. "To bear witness" means to convince that we "saw, heard, and felt" something. The ballet presents both a metaphor and a testimony to happiness. On stage, testimony is expressed through bodily means, accompanied by music. The experience that marked the dancers is potential and absent (happiness can be encountered, but cannot be stopped), and must be compensated, on the one hand, by the imprints preserved by the feeling body, and on the other hand, by the capacity for legitimate restitution that the expressing body receives through experience.

4. Conclusion. The imprint of happiness

At the beginning of our article, we quoted Jorge Asís about the happiness his protagonist experiences while dancing a milonga. At the end of the story, he notes that dancing isn't just a way to escape boredom, but it's vital: 'When everything around you is collapsing, you have to dance. It's uplifting, therapeutic, *vital* […]. Dance is given to us so that we can look at our lives from a distance and resolve all difficulties right there, in the dance' (Asís 2026: 126).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

The analysis shows that in the ballet *Gayane*, happiness is not only the theme of the plot. This idea manifests itself on verbal, musical, choreographic, visual, and bodily levels. In the early ballet *Happiness,* the idea was expressed directly, as a meta-interpretation of the title. *Happiness* was associated with collective labor, the Soviet way of life, and the restoration of public order. In *Gayane*, the temporary ideological plot has given way to a more stable cultural model. *Happiness* is no longer directly named but becomes the object of a multimodal manifestation through the actions of the characters, their desires, trials, and relationships. *Happiness* becomes a value-object. Gayane and Armen strive for happiness. Their love is based on reciprocity, trust and free choice, and gets recognition from the team. Therefore, the personal happiness of the characters simultaneously means the restoration of social and moral harmony. Gico represents the opposite value model. His feeling is not based on reciprocity, but on the desire for possession. Armen's final victory and the wedding restore order. Thus, the path to happiness is modeled according to the scheme: harmony – violation of homeostasis – testing on personal and social levels – restoration of harmony.

The semiotics of passions allows us to consider this path as a movement between dysphoria and euphoria. Jealousy, fear, anger, and despair form a dysphoric pole. Love, solidarity, joy, and reconciliation form a euphoric pole. The transition between them creates an emotionally intense space of the work. Happiness does not arise as a static state. It becomes the result of overcoming emotional and plot tension.

A special role is played by the orientational metaphor of 'Happy is up' / 'happiness is at the top.' The metaphor gets a direct choreographic expression. The dancers lift their bodies, jump, and point their weapons upward. Armen holds *Gayane* high. Her body is above the stage space for a while. This movement represents happiness as uplifting, winning, and achieving a desired state. Stage decorations support the vertical metaphor. Mountain peaks create a constant opposition of top and bottom on a visual level. The image of Ararat (on the banknote) and the Shirak Mountains (Minas Avetisyan) becomes not just a geographical backdrop, but also a visual pillar of happiness associated with the Armenian mountain landscape, national memory, and cultural identity. The top of a mountain corresponds to the peak of an emotional experience.

The choreography of The *Sabre Dance* combines martial and lyrical elements. The male part expresses strength, risk, struggle, and victory. The appearance of a woman changes the emotional structure of the dance. The military tension turns into a love dialogue at the visual and tactile levels. Happiness arises through the union of opposites: male and female, strength and tenderness, conflict and harmony. Through movement, the body connects the inner experience and the outer form. It retains traces of fear, desire, struggle, and joy. In this sense, the dancing body becomes a *medium* for presenting happiness.

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The musical structure plays a vital role in presenting the ballet as a metaphor of happiness. The lyrical themes, the gradual development of the melody, and the bright intonations of the finale create an image of the inner harmony of the characters. The contrast between the militant rhythm and the lyrical theme reproduces the transition from conflict to unity. The organic nature of the music connects happiness with nature, folk tradition, and native land.

Thus, the concept of happiness in the Gayane ballet manifests itself as a complex semiotic construct at the level of visuality, tactility, plasticity, musical harmony, and actant relationships. Happiness becomes visible, audible, and functioning in the Armenian geographical, cultural context and landscape. Ballet spectators witness the embodiment of the metaphor of happiness through complex semiotic means. In Evangelos Kourdis's terms, this involves the *translation* of happiness into the language of choreography as a *transfer operation of cultural information* (Kourdis 2025a: 718; Kourdis 2025b: 746).

We also selected *Gayane* as a corpus for analysis, presented in historical and contemporary perspectives, with the aim of emphasizing so-called "empirical vocation of semiotics." By studying social phenomena and cultural facts, semiotics operates in the space between theory, empiricism and application, and ultimately describes not a 'given object,' but a field that it 'helps to configure through its own operations of observation and persuasion' (Deni and Lammardo 2026: 2).

Our movements are as much a language as an action: 'This is what the body has to say about need, defeat, courage, despair, desire, joy, ambivalence, frustration, love' (Pite 2026). When dance takes hold of a *willing body*, a process of *translation of the untranslatable* occurs: 'it can translate the ineffable; acting as an intermediary between us and the unknown' (Pite 2026).

As spectators of the ballet *Gayane* or its fragment, the Sabre Danse, we become involved in a story-testimony of happiness, both from the standpoint of the semiotics of imprint, according to which meaning can only be observed when bodies retain *traces of interaction* with other bodies (Fontanille 2011: 178), and from the standpoint of Lotman's semiotics of culture, which asserts that observable meaning arises *only in the process of translation* between systems (Lotman 2004a: 268).

Lotman analyzed the phenomenon of 'untranslatable inspiration' as a transition from untranslatability to translation; Fabbri, citing Lotman, called this translation 'turbulence' (Fabbri 2024: 168); and Khachaturian, having included the inspired and breathlessly written fragment *Sabre Dance* in the ballet *Gayane*, characterized the future advantages of music for translation into choreographic language with the laconic phrase 'For the sake of ballet!' (Khachaturian 1980: 71).

To contribute to the development of dance semiotics, we sought, on the one hand, to show dance through the heterogeneity of its constituent elements – "movement, aesthetics, sensorimotor, socio-cultural and historical dimensions" (Guellouz 2024: 3).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0004 | **punctum.gr**

On the other hand, Lotman's approach to cultural semiotics and the post-Greimassian approach to bodily semiotics allowed us to emphasize 'the sensible body' (Fontanille 2026: 9) as the center of of Aram Khachaturian's organic music.

The ballet *Happiness* is present in the ballet *Gayane* as a potentialized existence, and our experience of audience interpretation and translation consists of finding traces of another experience that left an *imprint*. In this sense, *Gayane*, as the 'path to happiness,' becomes a 'springboard' (Greimas 1987: 99), leading from imperfection to perfection, to a happy moment or a *glimpse of the soul* (Pite 2026), shared with the audience.

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Videodance as political engagement in Latin America: Intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media

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BY: **Edgar Vite** and **Jorge Urueña**

ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media, having as key reference the development of videodance in Latin America, as a politically and socially engaged artistic language. Our approach incorporates ideas from performance studies, as developed by Diana Taylor, and the embodiment perspective of Falk Heinrich and Celia Balbina Fernández, who reflect on the connection between performance and technology, how this implicates the participation of remote bodies and relates to faraway places. In Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, the development of the interdisciplinary language of videodance is related to sociopolitical struggles, originating in narcotraffic violence, corrupt governments, guerrillas, and other complex realities. The semiotic configuration of situated videodance has a therapeutic function that allows us to imagine and construct new ways of living and coexisting. For this purpose, we semiotically analyze the local theoretical categories developed by Alarcón, Contreas, Celis, Mangieri, Monroy, Fernández, Vargas, and Arellano, among others, as applied to videodance works by Colombian and other Latin American choreographers, dancers, and filmmakers; showing how this artistic language constitutes an act of resistance and social transformation, which allows the healing of collective injuries and the revindication of synesthetic memories of bodies in violent contexts and territories.

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1. Some initial ideas

There is something unique when the body appears in discussion, expressing ideas, feelings, and sensations, in different art practices, especially in our time, because it is no longer connected with figurative narratives, as occurs in traditional forms of art (where the body is used to represent ideas of beauty, divinity, perfection, etc.). The body also becomes political; it directly shows that all actions have implications on subjects (concrete bodies are affected by different types of violence). But the body is not only understood as an individual entity; it is also a cultural and social manifestation (of institutions, ideologies, and governmental acts), which incarnates values, prejudices, identities, and other symbolic structures.

One key motivation for this paper relates to an inquiry about the body's role in common practices, and how the body relates to creative processes, especially where dance, technology, and new media intersect. In this context, we will examine: (a) the body's role in theoretical and practical perspectives; (b) the intersections between semiotics, performance studies, and embodiment; (c) experimentation with video as activism and as denunciation; (d) the poetic and aesthetic dimension of videodance in our time; and finally, (e) Colombian and other Latin American examples of videodance, as a mechanism for social catharsis and symbolic healing.

In analyzing the intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media in Latin American videodance, we focus on diverse types of violence, seen from a local perspective, and their connections to the global sociocultural context. We will employ a semiotic approach to studying videodance, concerned with sociopolitical problems and critical perspectives, including an aesthetic perspective on the body transfigured into images, showing the relevance of contemporary art projects that connect technology, performance, and dance practices.

2. Embodiment and performance studies from our perspective

In pursuing the above objectives we bring into dialogue two theoretical perspectives. First, it is important to talk about the physicality and materiality of the body; this theoretical perspective shows the presence of the body as a phenomenal basis, as all experience is mediated by our bodies. This is so in performance art but also in dance, especially seen from a contemporary perspective, where the connections between action, movement, and space emphasize the body's presence and its creative possibilities: 'A large body of texts exists on the significance of the materiality of the body in performance art, many highlighting the body as the phenomenal basis and pure existence' (Heinrich 2012: 2).

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Here appears the frontier between the internal and the external, private and public space, the intimate and the social. Through this, we may notice memories, sensibilities, tensions, disputes, and stories about individuals, and that is one reason why physical contact and touch is closely related to dance practices and movement experiences. In art practices, the role of the flesh leads the audience to no longer interpret a proposal as a representation. The semiotic distinctions between subject and object, and between performer and recipient, seem to collapse into the pure presence of existence.

When we focus on the body and its role in the construction of our experiences, we can see the significance of nonverbal languages, which enact complex semiotic systems of communication more directly and accurately than ordinary verbal language. In dance, just as in all performative arts, movements, corporal positions, bodily gestures, and facial expressions function as a complex system of communication, which is also connected to cultural, historical, and social contexts.

Performance studies analyze all kinds of actions, like the configuration of identity, belonging to certain communities, socializing with others, constructing complex systems of symbols, ways of creating meaning, and semiosis. Performance not only relates to humans; it also appears in the development of other natural species, like flowers, fungi, and nonhuman animals. And performance is even key to mechanical and artificial processes, like those of machines, robots, computer programs, and artificial intelligence. For Richard Schechner (Madeira et al. 2002: 2), this entails an open and complex perspective on performance: 'I think of performance not only in relation to human life, but the life of Gaia, of the planet, the life of the animals on it, the life of the trees, even the life of the rocks. They are all performing, in my sense of performing – that is, they are doing something.'

We also take as background theory Diana Taylor's study of *memory* and *repertoire* in different everyday and artistic contexts. Taylor reveals different ways of comprehending the idea of performance in all kinds of practices, and how the repetition and preservation of certain actions relate to social and cultural paradigms. In this sense, performance studies are connected to embodied perspectives, involving processes of recognition, memory, interaction with others, and self-formation: 'Embodied expression has participated and will probably continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting' (Taylor 2007: 16).

We incorporate Taylor's notion of *archival memory*, which has been adapted and expanded by the Latin American academic scholars and videodance creators we discuss in this paper. We are interested in how Taylor conceives the archive as a living being, and not only as a mausoleum of the past, which travels through different times, spaces, and cultures. She also clearly distinguishes different types of archives, which are not reduced to texts, documents, or ancient manuscripts; for there are also living memoires, stories, and cultural manifestations, which now also adopt video recording, digitalization, and new media technologies (ibid. 19).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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This allows us to develop a theoretical perspective that connects the role of the body to the development of art practices, which is fundamental to understanding dance as a discipline, but also to understanding the connections between the body, images, and new media. We believe that an comprehensive theoretical approach to understanding the aesthetics and politics of videodance requires a hybrid perspective combining semiotics, embodiment, and performance studies. This allows an expanded vision of dance, which allows us to explain the theoretical and practical aspects of performance practices in daily life, and their connections with art practices in recent times.

3. Videodance in sociopolitical contexts in Latin America

Videodance in Latin America has transitioned from a period of formal experimentation to a consolidated apparatus for resistance and memory. While European traditions have frequently prioritized the aesthetics of kinetic movement, the Latin American trajectory has developed a hybrid language that goes far beyond this by not merely documenting but actively co-constructing a political discourse centered on territory. This genre serves as a critical mechanism for the visibility of bodies that have historically been marginalized by dictatorial regimes (Motavita 2021), extractivism, and systemic social crises, positioning the moving image as a living archive of contested identities.

In Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, for example, videodance maintains an inextricable link with post-memory and the denunciation of human rights violations. Following the Southern Cone dictatorships, various artists and collectives utilized the screen to render visible the very bodies that the state apparatus sought to erase. By integrating choreographic explorations for the camera, emphasizing trauma and absence on the sites of former clandestine detention centers, these works intervene in the cultural semiosphere. This process of local adoption and experimentation with videodance transforms sites of historical violence into spaces of aesthetic significance and collective resilience (Tambutti and Gigena 2023).

On the other hand, in the Andean and Central American contexts, artistic productions frequently examine the relationship between the body and the land, emphasizing the consequences of rural violence and forced displacement. In Colombia, for example, videodance facilitates the narration of armed conflict through "sensitive research," whereby the dancer's movement engages directly with landscapes scarred by war, foregrounding flesh as *body* and *territory*. This approach allows the body to function as a seismograph of social tensions (Celis 2022), translating territorial trauma into a visual grammar oriented toward symbolic reparation and the development of a pedagogy for peace.

Likewise, the resurgence of feminism, gender issues, and political activism over the last decade has infused regional videodance with a renewed political urgency in

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exploring these topics. Contemporary productions investigate bodily sovereignty, reproductive rights, and the denunciation of femicide, utilizing accessible technologies and digital networks. This also shows the advantages of technological networks and digital practices in complex social contexts, where it is necessary to move away from official circuits and dominant narratives. Within this framework, the screen functions as a semiotic battlefield where patriarchal representations of desire are systematically challenged. Feminist videodance in Latin America (Flores and Campillay 2021) transcends aesthetic concerns, operating instead as an act of self-expression that fosters bonds of sisterhood and enhances the visibility of gender struggles within the virtual and the public spheres.

In the Costa Rican videodance (Sancho 2024), the female body is configured as a chronotope of violence, where historical patriarchal structures converge with the critical femicide statistics, as reported by the national judiciary. The "staggered violence" inherent to this body-time, as exemplified in the choreographies of Cristina Gigirey (1940–2006), translates into a bodily semiosis where movement is decoded through pre-established power structures. Consequently, the feminized body on stage becomes a dynamic sign that seeks to dignify the position of women in dance. By stripping away traditional male authority – which has historically dictated rhythm and movement – the performer reclaims the capacity to convey messages of protest, subverting the objectifying gaze and reframing vulnerability as a form of political agency.

In these works, the female body exists as language and protest. Interaction on stage generates a profound dialogic semiosis, in which the dancer's body simultaneously serves as the sender and receiver of power discourses, effectively marginalizing the traditional role of men in choreography and dance practices. According to the frameworks proposed by the Costa Rican choreographers Mireya Barbosa and Elena Gutiérrez (Sancho 2024), the performance intensifies this phenomenon, as the body is often "spoken for by others" in an environment where the gaze is mediated by a reality of systemic inequality. Choreography thus functions as a meaning-making process that allows the body to transition from an "object of violence" to a "subject of discourse," challenging the cultural disadvantages exposed.

The current state of the discipline reveals a significant trend toward the decolonization of the gaze and the integration of ancestral knowledge through new media. The convergence of cinematic performance with the demands of indigenous peoples is generating an audiovisual archive that interrogates notions of modern progress while celebrating epistemic diversity and embodied experiences. In Latin America, videodance has emerged as a robust interdisciplinary field. Far from being a niche genre, it functions as a powerful catalyst for discussing predominant narratives, performing identity and a critical reflection on freedom, justice, and identity within a constantly transforming continent.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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4. The roles of video, images, and art practices in our time

Interest in new media and technology is one of the reasons why access to video cameras became so popular in the 1960s and 1970s and remained so until the present day. After the popularization of this medium, movements and projects appeared that addressed social and political issues, moving away from official broadcast networks, defending autonomy, critical thought, and independent networks. This phenomenon lasted from 1968 to 1972, with the formation of groups and associations using video as a mechanism to empower minorities and denounce abuses, with the goal of defending human rights.

These historical antecedents explain the social and political dimensions of technology and new media, and why they are still so important in our time. Video may be used to resist oppressive narratives and to generate public debates and popular consciousness. From the very beginning of artists' experimentation with video, there appears a desire to denounce and politicize, as well as an intention to humanize technology. To be clear, this does not mean that every video work is devoted to political concerns and activism, but it has certainly become a powerful medium, extending worldwide (Gonçalves 2022: 10–11).

The idea of the image is no longer restricted to an epistemic or biological context, but extends to a social, cultural, and historical background, where images are created, consumed, and interpreted. From a semiotic perspective, the system of images that surround us deeply affects our habits and practices. Images are no longer reduced to the idea of copying reality, representing, duplicating, pretending, faking, etc.; thus, they have transcended the ideas of mimesis and simulation (Avram 2018: 2).

Since images have an ontological existence, they may be considered as objects, constructs, structures, nonverbal languages, and systems of semiosis, among other things. This implies that the duality and separation between image and reality is no longer useful and makes no sense. The role of the body, in particular its perceptions, actions, and manifestations, is key to understanding the meaning of images. In short, this implies that the world of images is intrinsically connected with the human body and its performative possibilities.

It is important to emphasize the role of the moving image, which has a long history and trajectory in cinema and visual arts. The mystery and attraction of moving images have captured the attention of audiences since the invention of cinema, and the complexity of this medium has evolved, inspiring interest in experimentation with video and the visual arts until the present day. Horea Avram reveals two key aspects of moving images: the first is their *capability of displacement* to different contexts, circuits, and networks, as they may be viewed and experienced from various times and spaces. The second is the inconstant nature of moving images, which affects the audience's perception and interpretation of them (2018: 3).

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Nowadays we transition from one type of screen to another, hundreds of times a day, to different moments and places; switching our attention from one device to another: computers, televisions, monitors, video games, cinema screens, etc. We are also surrounded by a system of cameras and surveillance, which directly affects our ways of acting and being. This is fundamental to understanding the connection between video and art practices, and for analyzing the relationship between technology, dance, and performance that occurs in videodance.

The link between video and performance concerns how recording oneself is connected to an introspective and autobiographical dimension. Video allows anyone to zoom in or out, to enclose certain gestures, to notice what is hard to perceive by a simple gaze. In Bruce Nauman's exploration of his own body, the camera works as a scanner of movement and self-reflection, generating an extension of time and space, as seen in works like *From Mouth to Hand* (1967).

It is no coincidence that Nauman studied theater and dance before his exploration of performance, indicating that he was interested in the role of the body in art practices and scenic contexts. This is crucial to comprehending the relevance of the body, time, and space in further experimentation with dance and video. So, we contend that this previous use of video, body art, and performance was relevant to the origins of videodance and its system of significance.

5. The poetics of the body are transfigured into images

The poetics of the body transfigured into images is a concept that emphasizes aesthetic possibilities and their application to practices in the visual arts. In this sense, we will discuss what happens in videodance's configuration and experimentation, how it connects the body's physicality with its fictional appearance on the screen, how the audience perceives and interacts with these art forms, how the choreography and the sequence of movements are transformed by the camera, and how movement, time, and space are perceived in this new expressive language (Vite 2021).

There is a magnetic relationship between dance and cinema, and this fusion reveals other aspects not limited to the scenic dimension of choreography. Since the experimentation of avantgarde film, there has been interest in exploring the possibilities of dance outside theaters and in fictional spaces, which was only possible on the screen. So, dancers' movements and sequenced actions are transfigured into the realm of image, where video edition and postproduction generate creative ways of moving and expressing oneself through the screen (Cerbino and Brum 2016: 109–110).

Rocco Mangieri describes the characteristics of a semiotic approach to the field of dance, which implies a connection between a theory of action and a theory of movement, where there emerges a reconciliation between the continuity and discontinuity

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0005 | **punctum.gr**

of time, space, body, and movement. Mangieri argues that semiosis in dance involves a cultural and social construction, which implies the generation of a sequence of actions by the dancer, involving plastic qualities of moving bodies, and the construction of a series of visual experiences, where all these elements directly connect with the audience's participation, stimulating their perception and interpretation of the visual and choreographic system of dance performance (2010: 19).

To understand these poetics, it is necessary to analyze the concept of "choreography for the camera," which contrasts with traditional dance performance, in that the construction of movement is only made for the screen. The dance space is now translated into a fictional and imaginative space, which is no longer restricted to a theater or a white box, such that physical laws are defied by new possibilities of body and movement. As we mentioned before, there is a close connection between how time and space are perceived in videodance, as seen in the elongation of movements, the freezing of action, and frenetic acceleration, among other examples.

María Contreras argues that *estesia* (*aisthesis*) is directly related to a semiotic approach to the body and, in consequence, to dance and videodance, which connect sensible human experience with the somatic cognitive process (2012: 14). We affirm that the body is the unique locus where empirical perceptions and human emotions are semiotically integrated with signs and meanings; thus, the body is the medium for interacting with other subjects and their bodies. From this perspective, the aesthetic configuration of videodance involves experimentation with synesthesia, a somatic perspective on memory and oblivion, and a reflection on haptic experiences.

Including the body in semiotic studies allows us to understand the local contexts and social conditions of individuals and their cultural backgrounds. Contreras discusses how the semiotics of the body exceed the limitations of structural and generative semiotics when analyzing cultural practices (2012: 16). The body is no longer a mere accessory or prothesis, or even a simple vehicle for cognitive processes and the construction of meaning, either discursively or in the field of action. It is instead the incarnation of the subject, the place for developing one's personal identity, and the condition of possibility of one's relationship with oneself and with others.

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6. Videodance as political engagement, aesthetic apparatus, and performative incarnation

In Latin America, videodance is closely related to contemporary political practice; so, it is conceptualized as a form of semiosis through which subjects constitute their political identity within a specific context. Its historical dimension facilitates a process wherein the subject, through movement, critically projects against hegemonic discourses and predominant narratives. Valeria De Luca (2017) examines the shift in contemporary semiotics toward the passionate and corporeal dimensions of meaning. This transition has enabled dance to be interpreted beyond its traditional configuration, allowing it to be understood as a semiotic process through which the subject generates novel meanings. While the discipline has integrated concepts such as intersubjectivity and bodily practices, a theoretical lacuna persists regarding dance. This gap concerns dance's capacity to serve as a practice that challenges the meaning of political action within a defined territory.

Consequently, De Luca's (2017) conceptualization of the "gesture" is revisited as a fundamental bridge between physical movement and cultural imagination, and this is also connected to our perspective of performance studies and the role of rituals. Given that contemporary politics is increasingly characterized by its iconic nature and laden with symbolic gestures, this landscape has become a primary source of creative inspiration for performers. In videodance, the gesture functions as a semiotic unit, rooted in the iconic, through which primacy is established in the political significance of bodily movement. In Latin American contemporary dance, the gesture has emerged as a distinct sign of protest, facilitating a critique that directly challenges the hegemony of current political structures.

Performances by women in Chile, such as those by the collective LasTesis, have been fundamental to politicizing the female body, transforming it into a space for re-signifying the historical debts incurred by past governments against women in that country (Vargas and Arellano 2021). The body is understood as a semiotic mode (Pardo 2012), from which state control over women's reproductive rights emerges as a semiosis of protest. Through choreographies that translate texts from feminist anthropology into movement, these performances expose the "pedagogy of cruelty" and demand autonomy in the face of legal restrictions on abortion. These actions not only occupy public space but re-signify the pelvis and the womb – historically associated with compulsory motherhood – as territories of sovereignty and desire (Flores and Campillay 2021).

Furthermore, in Chile, the phenomenon of mass performances and collective embodied practices, during the 2018 Feminist May and the 8 March strikes, demonstrates a poetics of resistance that links contemporary dance with visual activism.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0005 | **punctum.gr**

This performance was so powerful that it went viral and was enacted and incarnated by female bodies in other Latin American countries, like Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, among others. The use of green scarves integrated into the choreography functions as an icon of the "green wave," where rhythmic movement and collective synchrony seek to break the isolation of the body's private experience and transform it into a collective body, and a demand for civil rights (Jeria and Gonzalez 2025).

In this approach, the body is not merely a medium but the central axis around which meaning is formed. The National Centre for Historical Memory in Colombia has supported various dance collectives in developing their reflections on the burden of war, through the question: 'At what speed do memories move?' These collectives have taken this question to express some very slow movements, following the rhythm of the gaita and the marimba in some cases, so as to demonstrate on stage how war leaves bodies so heavy that they can only move slowly to resist the traces it has left in the affected communities.

Videodance is also a mechanism of documentation, preservation, and living memory. In this regard, Ximena Monroy argues that video is more than just a recording of ephemeral and performative experiences, by implying a *corporal archive*, recorded on the skin of the dancers as a living memory. Monroy considers videodance to go far beyond the dialectics of the danced image, instead presenting the dancing bodies as living archives, intimate memories, and movement repertoires, connecting with the theoretical approach of Diana Taylor, but from a local and heterogenous perspective (Monroy 2019: 8).

Visual experiences are combined with haptic experiences, and the image in movement is closely related to tactile sensations, which reveal different types of approach among the dancing bodies. In dance, the skin and the flesh are relevant to self-formation and the role of embodied experiences. Mónica Alarcón (2015: 130-140) argues that the *human touch* is key to developing bodily consciousness and the perception of movement. For us, the significant paradox of the combination of visual and tactile experiences in videodance is that it simultaneously plays with proximity and distance.

In this framework, time is conceptualized as a semiosis (Lotman 1999) through which the body generates meaning, facilitating an exercise of artistic creation aimed at addressing the intensity of armed conflict in contemporary politics. Temporality enables the subject to construct a language through which pain, the loss of a loved one, and the linguistic impossibility of processing grief are enacted. As noted by a Colombian choreographer: 'The duration of this dance allows people to realize that memories possess weight. If we are unable to release them through choreographic movement, they persist as lifelong burdens, manifesting as symptoms of a new illness' (Ramírez, 2020, personal communication).

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Furthermore, videodance utilizes another form of semiosis critical to political engagement in the local context: the synesthetic nature of the body (Urueña 2023). This semiosis is informed by the construction of movements and cinematographic shots, arising from responses to ontological inquiries such as 'How does bitterness move through the body after a guerrilla attack?' or 'What is the color of the heaviness of memory?' (Urueña 2025). This suggests that meaning is constructed by taking sensory inputs – such as taste, touch, and sight – and semiotically translating them into movements and gestures.

According to Nicola Dusi (2015), *intersemiotic translation,* or *intermedial transposition*, is the creative crossing of media boundaries between distinct sign systems, transforming a source text while expanding its semiotic possibilities. Applied to videodance, this process bridges *choreographic syntax*, such as bodily movement and spatial rhythm, and *cinematographic syntax*, such as framing, camera mobility, and editing. The camera selects, magnifies, and recontextualizes gestures, making bodily shuddering or subtle shifts resonate in entirely new ways. This deliberate mediation creates fresh semiotic layers, proving that videodance operates as a distinct aesthetic language, rather than a simple reproduction of live performance.

A notable example of this intersemiotic translation is the work of the Colombian collective El Cuerpo Habla, based at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Antioquia. Their videodance pieces specifically examine the body in contexts following the signing of the Colombian peace agreements. When these works are analyzed through the lens of Iuri Lotman's (1999) semiosis and the principles of synesthetic semiosis (Urueña 2025), the dancer's body constitutes a "text" within the semiosphere of Latin American culture. This text seeks to translate taste, color, and other semiotic variables into the physical presentation of bodies through the camera and the body transfigured into images, projected on screen.

For instance, the bitterness of memory is semiotically translated into shots where bodies are enveloped in blankets, reminiscent of the *amarres* or bundles discarded in the Medellín River. This imagery reveals a state of passive decomposition, from which the subject can only be liberated as the internal body initiates movement, loosening its bonds, and reconstructing a physical path toward healing and renewal. In this sense, videodance is a liminal space where cinematic and choreographic languages converge. This work functions as a mechanism for generating meaning that translates social trauma into an aesthetic structure, allowing collective memory to be reconfigured through the semiotic "explosion" that occurs when art intervenes in rigid political discourses (Lotman 1996).

Another interesting example of how this kind of intersemiotic translation has been explored in videodance is *No Azara* (2023), by Lobadys Pérez, a Colombian dancer and choreographer who has experimented with contemporary dance and

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0005 | **punctum.gr**

videodance on several occasions. For this work, Lobadys based his choreography on the song *No Azara* (2021), composed by the Colombian singer La Muchacha. This song addresses the violent police oppression of legitimate protests generated by COVID in 2021. It denounces the brutal use of force in the pursuit of young students, the disappearance of people, and arbitrary imprisonment, among other manifested forms of violence. The title of the song is a local Spanish expression, which could be translated as "You do not disturb me" or "Not overwhelmed."

The choreography created by Lobadys, in collaboration with the Periferia Dance Company, connects the forceful images of the lyrics with the expressive language of contemporary dance and its sequences of movements. This videodance was filmed in a *finca* in the countryside; a type of place which in the local imaginary is associated with disputed territories, where displacement is common, as are guerrilla and paramilitary forces, which are part of local sociopolitical conflicts. This place's symbolic connotations are also connected with the ideas of proximity and distance, demonstrating the relevance of proxemic experimentation in audiovisual productions.

The camera interacts with the dancers, sometimes as another dance partner, sometimes following their bodies' trajectories, sometimes zooming out, and at other times confronting the dancers and even the spectator. In some scenes, it is possible to perceive the dancers' breath, to sense their contact, and to see their gestures up close, expressing anger, sadness, fear, joy, and liberation. One visual metaphor that continually appears is the ritual of saying goodbye and the idea of forced displacement; so, there are poetic images that portray involuntary travel and emotive farewells.

The political value of videodance resides in its capacity to act as a semiotic frontier and a liminal space for constructing identity and community: a site of translation where social exclusion or "noise" is transformed into comprehensible and resilient information. The Colombian works examined here show bodies fragmented by violence being reintegrated into a new fabric of meaning, challenging the centers of power within the dominant semiosphere and reconfiguring new poetics of the body transfigured into images. Ultimately, videodance may promote a form of cultural self-communication that reinforces identity and the agency of human rights in disputed bodies and territories.

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7. Symbolic healing, political education, and social transformation

Videodance may function as a ritual of symbolic reparation, addressing enforced disappearance and the trauma of past dictatorships, healing, and catharsis. An example of this is *Videodanza... y el mar* (2012), a choreographic piece filmed at the geographical sites around Argentina where the remains of the disappeared – victims of the "death flights" – were historically recovered. Produced under the artistic direction of the choreographer Aurelia Chillemi, with music by Osvaldo Aguilar, and direction by the filmmaker Adolfo Cabanchik, this work was developed in Partido de la Costa during the 2012 Week for Memory, Truth, and Justice. The collective sought to construct a "semiosis of forgiveness," re-signifying the coastline through a choreographic sequence representing the pain of victims moving through the waves, eventually allowing the body to "settle" and to be reborn as a "seed in the sand."

In a similar vein, Pollini (2026), in *No tiene entidad*, explores the search for identity and ethical positioning amidst the vestiges of the past. This work is elaborated as an exercise in tactile and visual memory, where flesh becomes a living archive, and video acquires the status of a historical and political document. Produced in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1976 Argentine coup, this piece utilizes the body as the primary vehicle for 'embodied and incarnated memory.' Rather than aestheticizing horror, the choreography employs the language of movement to process the voids and silences left by the dictatorial regime.

According to the Lluvino collective, in their work *Recuerpo* (2016), videodance functions as a mechanism for healing, or at least achieving catharsis, where physical praxis allows for the processing of trauma that exceeds linguistic expression, aiding victims in 're-composing their history.' This work proposes a semiosis of healing by reconfiguring the body – traditionally viewed within the conflict as a passive receptacle of violence – into a system of regenerative signs and a way of empowering individuals. In this process, the scars, traces, and traumas incarnated in flesh are transformed from stigmata of victimization into indices of a history that demands narration and transformation.

From our perspective, healing occurs when the body, through research-creation, achieves a re-signification of its own semiotic codes: the gesture that once symbolized defense or pain shifts to a language of autonomy and care. Thus, videodance articulates a grammar of "symbolic healing," where movement serves as a vehicle for transitioning from the wound to reclaimed territory, allowing sovereignty to be regained. This restorative semiosis is further validated by the National Center for

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Historical Memory, and is evidenced in the multimodal production *Dance, Memory, and Peace* (2016), which examines how dance in Colombia narrates dispossession while fostering hope. So, videodance ensures that bodily resistance is not ephemeral, but instead becomes a permanent testimony of human dignity, facing different types of barbarism and defending justice and human rights.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, the body in motion, captured by the lens, becomes the definitive archive of Latin America's sociopolitical struggles, challenging official oblivion and censorship through the moving image. The camera becomes an active witness to complex and intimate histories, allowing artists to communicate the sociopolitical problems of heterogenous people and countries. In the examined works, it is possible to find topics related to dictatorial governments, acts of feminicide, gender conflicts, patriarchal structures, armed conflicts, and other forms of violence, which are located on specific bodies and carved on their flesh, or even evinced by bodies' invisibility and absence.

Videodance, as an artistic language, is capable of symbolically and poetically expressing the incarnated horrors of these sociopolitical struggles; thus, it is deeply connected with activism. In our research for this paper, we have discovered that the aesthetic dimension of videodance in Colombia is associated with these artist's political commitment and their need for public denunciation but also serves as a medium for healing the affective and psychological wounds of our context.

Since the beginning of their experimentation with video, artists have appropriated it and other audiovisual technologies for political purposes, and to effectively amplify their voices, with the goal of connecting with other people and communicating, over a wider range, similar problems around the world. The use of video might be a strategy to oppose predominant narratives and generate awareness in people, and a way to activate social catharsis in such collective situations.

There is a therapeutic aspect to videodance, which is very salient in a wide range of the Colombian and other Latin American works we have analyzed. This is also connected with the idea of the body's synesthetic nature, and the construction of a grammar of holistic healing, where movement, touch, and gesture allow the subject to regain sovereignty over their body and make room for new possibilities of being.

Finally, a semiotic approach to videodance, as a cultural and social phenomenon in Latin America, requires a perspective that combines the theoretical perspective of performance studies – explaining the construction of cultural identity, the place of living memories on bodies, and the performative dimension of creative processes –

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with the incarnation of different types of experiences and the relevance of the body in research processes, as occurs in the embodiment perspective. The convergence of these theories allows us to clearly explain the intersemiotic relationships between the body, images, and new media in our time, and how these principles interact in local contexts and regional practices.

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Beyond the music:
Dancing (with) techno

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BY: **Michele Dentico**

ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates on musical genres oscillate between claims of their disappearance and their persistence. This article reframes the question by shifting from taxonomic classification to the situated pragmatics of collective listening, taking techno music as a case study. Adopting an ethnosemiotic framework and drawing on multi-sited ethnography, the analysis suspends the genre category to observe how meaning emerges on the dancefloor. The analytical operators are borrowed from an unlikely source: the UK's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, which defines the music played at raves as sounds 'wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats.' Repetition and succession are treated as semiotic operators through which recurrent relations across musical flow and collective bodily movement are formalized. Repetition makes pertinent figurative contagion, rhythmic synchronization, and solidary touch, while succession foregrounds thermokinetic modulation and intersubjective conduction. Together, these dynamics produce a contingent, ethnographically attested suspension of genre/gender matrices – a suspension radically distinct from the neoliberal "fluidity" promoted by streaming platforms. The dancefloor thus appears as a temporary configuration in which a different form of life becomes concretely possible, suspending utilitarian imperatives and enabling a democratic, low-threshold sociality grounded in repetition and bodily co-presence.

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1. Introduction: The crisis of musical genres

There is a major dilemma facing contemporary music, and that is the issue of genre division. As a result of both postmodern echoes regarding the fluidity of categories and new perspectives fueled by the streaming music industry, some argue for the 'disappearance of musical genres' as we have known them (Petrusich 2021), while others maintain that they are far from dead (Johnson 2020; Smith 2024). While Spotify, through one of its founders, has for some years now outlined the 'utopian' idea of music without precise boundaries (Ek 2018), and some propose defining it according to a context-oriented approach (Krogh 2020), the debate has not failed to highlight how these issues often translate into a strictly neoliberal proposal, more oriented toward the commodification of differences and the structuring of consumer identity than toward an actual intervention in musical art (Muchitsch and Werner 2024). This is a critical position with which the present work engages in dialogue, although it differs on a specific point that will be clarified later: the suspension of genre matrices – described as a meaning-making effect of the relationship between dance and techno – is situated, contingent, ethnographically attested, and does not coincide with the fluidity instrumentally proclaimed by the rhetoric of the platforms.

On the other hand, genre is a central notion that runs through semiotic reflection and is in many ways irreducible to it. By genre, in fact, we mean the complex of socially shared pragmatic expectations that guide the reception of a text. Eco (1979:10), for example, observes that if Kafka's *Trial* is read as 'a trivial criminal novel,' the text collapses: 'it has been burned out, just as a "joint" is burned out to produce a private euphoric state.' After all, as Rastier (1989) noted and Marrone (1998) later clarified, no text exists without a genre. Musical genres, in particular, despite their increasingly fluid boundaries, continue to function as culturally recognized, self-generating semantic-discursive universes capable of generating the texts that in turn regenerate them (Marino 2020).

For its part, techno music represents a perfect methodological object for exploring this set of issues. First of all, one of the earliest scholarly approaches to it suggested that it is a form of music that challenges established musicological paradigms. While "canonical" musical genres and the events associated with them refer to an experience or, in any case, point to something else, the practices associated with certain types of music literally have the peculiarity of constructing it (Reynolds 1998), to the point that a paradigm shift in its understanding becomes necessary – one that asks not so much what music means in these contexts but how it functions (ibid.): a problem defined in this way is of absolute semiotic relevance. More recently, however, new perspectives are emerging that emphasize the importance of granting techno a musicological dignity that is detached from its context of consumption (Benedetti 2023, 2024), both from a historical and a strictly sonic standpoint.

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However, when approaching techno, the genre category presents two intertwined difficulties. The first is definitional: since its inception, techno has been considered an umbrella term encompassing an almost infinite number of subgenres in constant redefinition (De Dominicis 1998) – tech-house, hard, hypnotic, industrial, gabber, tekno with a 'k,' schranz, late dubstep – whose boundaries constantly overlap and clash, to the point that those approaching it from a research perspective tend, not coincidentally, to avoid the term in favor of broader formulations such as 'electronic music"'(Attimonelli and Tomeo 2022).

The second difficulty is of a socio-semiotic nature, and here we touch upon the methodological crux of the matter: precisely because the genre functions as a device of expectations, it produces effects of pre-codification that pragmatic research must suspend, at least temporarily, if it wishes to access situated dynamics of meaning.

Techno dancing, in short, is not a dance in the traditional sense of the term: although there have been various attempts to codify techno dancing through theatrical performance – the work developed by (LA)HORDE is particularly relevant here – there are no steps, instructors, or canons of aesthetically 'correct' execution. Choreographic figures, when they emerge, do so through contagion and dissolve through the subtraction of repetition; forms of intercorporeality stabilize and deconstruct themselves in the course of the same event.

2. Methodological issues

Once the theoretical and methodological challenges have been clarified, it becomes clear what contribution ethnosemiotics can make in this regard (Marsciani 2007, 2012, 2020; Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017; Mazzarino 2022). As a boundary discipline employing ethnographic methods and grounded in a situated epistemic relationship (Dentico 2026), ethnosemiotics does not integrate pre-established sociological categories without first verifying their relevance in the local production of manifest meaning (Marsciani 2020). Applied to the subject of this article, this principle means we cannot start from techno-as-a-genre and ask what people who dance to it do with it, because this already implies that "techno" is the musical entity being experienced. Rather, we must start from the contingency of its consumption and ask what happens there to restore its meaning, following various research perspectives such as those of DeNora (2003, 2004) and Hennion (2007, 2013). The former called for rethinking the sociology of music by focusing on the ways it is used in everyday life, while the latter suggested focusing on the perspective of amateurs, that is, enthusiasts. In both cases, the idea is to concentrate on the contingent modes of listening to music, an empirical level that can be grasped through the combined method of participant observation and in-depth interviews – that is, through the lens of ethnosemiotics – with

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the aim of understanding the modes of interaction among the actors – human and non-human, including music itself – that occur and develop in concrete situations of enunciation.

The departure from musical genre, however, opens a secondary – and seemingly paradoxical – door through which to re-enter the field from another angle. This door is the one opened by the UK's *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act* of 1994, the first, historic piece of legislation enacted to make raves prosecutable. Considering that starting from 'legal norms is a choice that allows us to begin establishing certain criteria of relevance for semiotic analysis'[1] (Bassano 2018: 4), it is curious to note how, in legally defining its object, the Criminal Act offers a de facto pragmatic definition:

> Powers to remove persons attending or preparing for a rave. […] This section applies to a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music […] includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats. (UK legislation 1994; see also D'Onofrio 2015)

This definition is paradoxical, since it comes from the law and not from musicology, but it is precisely because of this estrangement from the field of musicology that it works, as it carves out and frames the phenomenon from a pragmatic perspective, even though it is in fact a very broad definition that can easily be applied to any type of music. This aspect, however, is not a problem, because the techno sound family, rather than having distinctive and definitive characteristics, in fact magnifies and radicalizes the musical traits described here (Dentico 2024) through four sememes: emission, succession, beating, repetition. Relevant to this paper – that is, useful for framing, describing, and interpreting the dimension of dance in the collective listening experience of techno – are the second and fourth: succession and repetition.

The thesis put forward is that these two sememes function as operators through which relations between techno's musical structure, dance figures, collective bodily synchronization, thermokinetic modulation, intersubjective conduction, and ecstatic-aesthetic trance can be formalized.

The concept of 'operator' will be understood here in a sense analogous to that previously introduced by Marsciani for the 'image operator' (originally in Italian: *operatore di immagini*) where an image is a formalized meaning effect (Marsciani in Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017). In turn, the operator is neither a concrete actor nor a substantial property of the object, but a mediating function through which effects emerging in the relation between the described object and the describing instance are formalized.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian and French sources are the author's.

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In a recent development (Dentico 2026), the term 'operator of impressions' was chosen for two reasons. First, to distance oneself from the excessive importance accorded to sight in ethnographic objectification procedures; second, to make use of the term 'impression,' a foundational term in the definition of the *meaning effect* found in the Dictionary by Greimas and Courtés (1982: 187-188). It is in this strong sense that repetition and succession will function here as operators of analysis, starting from the formalization of the effects revealed by the interviews and ethnographic excerpts. A clarification is necessary regarding the use of the term 'techno' in the following pages. We have already seen that this musical family exhibits porous boundaries and an internal plurality that makes its taxonomic delimitation problematic.

Nevertheless, 'techno' circulates as a term of use far beyond its strict musicological definition: when a partygoer says 'I'm going to dance to techno,' they are naming what, within their narrative programs of enjoyment, functions as an object of value (in the Greimasian sense). In short, not so much a repertoire label as the focal point of a desired practice. It is not uncommon, moreover, for what a person describes as techno to turn out to be something musically distinct. It is in this pragmatic-narrative sense, and not in the classificatory one, that the term will be used in the following pages: wherever it appears, it should be understood as an abbreviation of the pragmatic configuration that has emerged through the sememes of the *Criminal Act*, a configuration that coincides with what the partygoers invest in as the object of their enjoyment. The aim of this article is therefore to reconstruct and formalize this configuration through these two operators. Repetition and succession do not designate causal forces internal to the practice, nor successive stages of its unfolding. They select two prevalences within a network of already manifested effects of meaning: repetition makes pertinent the iterative, contagious, and reciprocal relations that traverse sonic flow and bodily movement; succession makes pertinent continuous modulation, thermokinetic transformation, and intersubjective conduction. Their distinction is analytical rather than empirical, since the effects gathered under either operator remain mutually implicated within the same situated configuration. The relation between music and dance is therefore treated neither as an identity nor as a linear translation, but as a structural homology reconstructed from their contingent co-articulation on the dancefloor.

Methodologically, the article is based on a multi-sited ethnography conducted for doctoral research between February 2021 and March 2023 in the techno scenes of Rome, Bologna, and Paris, supplemented by further fieldwork in Italy, Denmark and Albania in subsequent years. The corpus includes almost forty participant observations in clubs, free parties, raves, and festivals, together with sixteen in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited by word of mouth among people who described themselves as enthusiasts of these events, understood here in Hennion's pragmatic sense of amateurs: actors whose competence is constituted through attachment to and

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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participation in the practice (Hennion 2007). Demographic variables were not adopted as sampling criteria, since the research did not aim to produce a sociological profile of techno audiences, but to reconstruct the situated modes through which such attachment becomes meaningful. The study population was thus constituted pragmatically rather than demographically: the relevant criterion was attachment to and competence within the practice. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a flexible thematic outline, while allowing participants to develop issues they considered relevant. They also served to test the pertinence of the ethnographic findings: what had emerged through participant observation could thus be confirmed, reformulated, or called into question through the discourse of other situated instances. The theoretical framework is ethnosemiotics as developed, in particular, by Marsciani (2007, 2012, 2020), in its constitutive tension with relational ethnography (Desmond 2014) and the semiotics of passions (Greimas and Fontanille 1991; Pezzini 1996, 1998), and in its incorporation of the instance of description and of image production as a distinctive mode through which the body takes its place within discourse.

In the following pages, we will draw upon ethnographic excerpts and interviews, appropriately highlighted. Regarding the former, we will limit ourselves to referring to the location and date where the participant observation took place. Regarding the latter, they will be identified by self-chosen nicknames that the interviewees adopted autonomously, both to protect their identity and to feel more at ease discussing aspects that may be controversial from a social and legal standpoint. In cases where, within participant observations, subjectivities appear for whom no nickname was collected – because they were not interviewed or were not directly involved in the research – they will be indicated by a fictional letter. Both of these approaches are designed to respect the privacy of both the locations and the individuals involved in the research. It should also be noted that ethnographic notes and interviews were collected in Italian and French; in the present article they have been translated by the author, with attention to preserving as far as possible the spoken form of the expressions and the orality of the fieldwork. Citations from academic sources in languages other than English also have likewise been translated by the author, unless an existing English translation is cited.

On this basis, and using these tools, we will seek to highlight the semiotic structures that ensure that in these environments, music is experienced as something to 'hear,' 'feel,' 'inhabit,' and 'live' rather than to 'listen to,' 'contemplate,' and 'understand' (Agostini 1998: 61).

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3. Dancing as a predicate: From the human/music interface to sound-aesthetic conduct

Before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to establish the theoretical framework that enables the mediation of impression operators from the level of musical structure to that of collective movement. This transition hinges entirely on the human/music interface model theorized by Gino Stefani (1996, 1998), and in particular on the idea – crucial to the perspective adopted here – that meaning in music does not reside in the musical object but in the contingent relationship established between the subjectivity of listening and the music itself. This relationship, to put it another way, is never mechanical nor governed by a causal link, but always interactive (Stefani 1996: 43): a notion that takes on particular relevance in the case of techno, where the auditory apparatus is not simply stimulated by a sound stream, but is engulfed and drawn into an experience that is immediately, and intensely, sensory-synesthetic (Stefani 1998: 40).

In a genre of music where melody is generally placed in the background and where the most significant – and in some ways defining – dimension is the rhythmic one, it is in fact through movement – in what Stefani (ibid.: 60) defines as rhythmic conduct – that the subjectivity of listening is able to perform complex acts of appropriation and re-semantization of the music through the production of semiotic configurations and sensory reinterpretations. This is a process of somatic translation, since rhythm, through the 'spatio-temporal coordination' it imposes, allows for 'that highlighting or putting into perspective which enables a meaningful translation of the sensible' (Ceriani 2020: 21). In this sense, the interface can be understood not as a mere bridge between two separate worlds but as a genuine instance of mediation between the user and the environment (Diamanti 2003), which in our case defines a relational field where music and the body constitute themselves as such in the very act of their encounter. Rhythmic conduct, in fact, 'manifests itself in behaviours that can be, on the one hand, a sensorimotor appropriation of music, and on the other, the production of music suited to this appropriation' (Stefani 1998: 62): there is no hierarchy between music and the body, but a co-constitution.

This general model of musical listening as rhythmic conduct is supplemented by a specification that becomes necessary in the case of collective techno listening, where other variables are added to the human/music interface to aim for exhaustiveness: all non-human actors, such as speakers, video and light effects, but also the effects of psychoactive substances. In particular, here we will understand the latter as genuine passional devices that intervene in the mode of being (Greimas 1983) and which, within the somatic dimension of the subjectivity of listening (cf. Barthes and Havas 2019), contribute to defining its semiotic state on the narrative level. Between techno and empathogens such as MDMA, in particular, a profound formal homology emerges that

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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enables a genuine dynamic of mutual translation (Marrone 2005). The perceptual distortions produced by these substances, in fact, do not merely accompany the musical experience but radicalize it, magnifying certain constitutive features such as tactility and vibration, and, in a more comprehensive sense, also the 'grip of sound' (Stefani 1996) and *saisie esthétique* (Greimas 1987), to the point of bringing to the fore elements that would otherwise remain in the shadows. In this sense, substances do not constitute a third element to be inserted as a filter between the two terms of the interface, but rather bring to the fore the relevance of the situated somatic-perceptual dimension within a theory of signification. They certainly modify the interface, but in doing so they highlight how the two dimensions of experience and thought (cf. Coquet 2007; Fabbri 2008) are inextricably intertwined in the interpretation of the world, because modifying one also transforms the other, thereby opening the doors to possibilities for interpreting the world.

Thus, emerges what Stefani (1998: 50) calls 'sound-aesthetic conduct,' which, as will be seen, retains not only passionate but also figurative and narrative traits, and which develops in the conjunction of rhythm, the effects of substances, and collective somatic response. Everything in this relational field revolves around a single predicate: dancing. Dancing is the foundational performative event of collective techno listening – it is what makes techno a successful musical phenomenon, what allows it to exist as such. To assert this is to overturn the common-sense assumption that one first listens to music and then, perhaps, dances to it: in techno, it is the practice of dancing that constitutes the music as a relevant object, and it is only within this practice that the agents who organize it allow themselves to be observed semiotically.

The articulations discussed below should not therefore be understood as distinct sensory channels, nor as phases arranged in a chronological sequence. Sound, movement, touch, heat, bodily density, spatial disposition, and the effects of substances are mutually pertinent within the same relational field, although their respective weight varies from one configuration to another. Repetition and succession isolate two contingent prevalences within this field: the former foregrounds iterative and reciprocal relations; the latter, continuous and thermokinetic modulation, and conduction. Their separation is analytical, not empirical. Figurative contagion is consequently one of the forms through which embodied listening becomes formalizable, not the principle to which its other sensory articulations can be reduced.

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4. Repetition

The sememe of repetition introduces the operational translation at the level of the musical structure of the loop – that is, the circular and layered organization of techno (Agostini 1998) – which, in the common understanding, constitutes its defining feature. Understood as the generation of differences through iteration (Deleuze 1968), repetition does not merely define the sonic dimension of the event but, by the same logic, also makes its somatic-collective dimension analytically pertinent.

4.1. Figurative contagion

It was mentioned at the outset that techno dancing is not codified and that, consequently, there is no canon of aesthetically 'correct' execution, nor even a recognized and certified 'wrong' way to dance. Nevertheless, somatic figures regularly emerge from the seemingly indistinct mass of those dancing 'unconventionally.' Once they stand out as impressions, configurations, and effects of meaning for an interpreting instance, they may orient the movements of the people around them. The ethnographic material documents numerous instances of this:

> At one point, F. makes a movement with her arms, swirling them around in a whirlwind. After a few seconds, S. next to her makes a similar movement, and then a boy behind them, who had both of them in his field of vision, performs an almost identical gesture. (Paris, 4/6/22)
> I make a movement with my arms, like a beat, and out of the corner of my eye I notice that Ridan mimics it almost exactly. (Rome, 12/2/22)
> A guy raises his hands to the sky and I feel it's just the right thing to do; it fits perfectly as a movement, so I raise mine too. (Paris, 23/7/22)
> Both Carmine and Joyce make a particular movement, difficult to describe, easier to put into practice; it's a kind of gesture I hadn't seen during the evening, yet evidently a guy standing nearby likes it so much that he joins in on this movement too. (Rome, 4/2/22)

In all these cases, the dynamic is the same: one body performs a movement, another picks it up, takes it on, modifies it slightly in the process, and in turn offers it as a configuration to another instance, which may in turn take it up if it finds it pleasurable. These are intersomatic and intersubjective translations, where repetition is not mechanical but – exactly as happens in the sound loop, which according to Szepanski (2021: 133) 'must not always repeat the same thing, but repeats, when it succeeds as a track, the variation' – generates difference in the act of repeating. One's movement is not necessarily identical to another's, but it is similar enough to be recognizable as

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0006 | **punctum.gr**

a reprise, and different enough to constitute a translation in its own right. It is in this minimal deviation, in this variation of the same, that the semiotic relevance of gestural repetition lies: not in the copy, but in repeating as variation.

The theoretically decisive point is that this emergence of figures does not pass through a code. No one teaches anyone the 'right movement,' no one corrects the 'wrong movement'; yet the figures propagate, stabilize for a few seconds into shared patterns, dissolve, and make way for others, creating spaces of sociality and communication where neither words nor the body understood as an aesthetic object are decisive, but rather shared participation itself (Barbieri 2020). The analogy with the structure of techno music is, in this case, surprisingly precise: just as the sound loop produces momentary iterative territories that then dissolve into the next modulation, so the dance figures constitute momentary gestural territories, recognizable in their internal coherence and in their dissolution. Repetition, in both cases, is the principle through which a code is created without there being a code. Rather, contingent, local, temporary configurations emerge that do not pre-exist the practice but are produced within it and dissolve with it.

4.2. **Rhythmic synchronization**

If figurative contagion concerns the emergence of figures, rhythmic synchronization concerns the temporality that makes them possible. It has already been noted that the only aesthetic criterion that can actually be identified is keeping time: a minimal synchronization with the beat of the rhythm. Confirmation of this comes from one of the few interviews that explicitly addresses the issue of judging others' dancing:

> when you go dancing you get all embarrassed and you're like "damn I suck at dancing" but it's not dumb sure people feel awkward but honestly if you think about it eighty percent of people are shit at dancing I mean they're offbeat that's a thing I hate when someone's right up against me and they're offbeat oh my god I can't stand them I can't stand them (Danika)

Within the material considered here, the only form of 'wrong' performance that emerges is one that breaks synchronization: not one that proposes a figure outside the canon (there are no canons), but one that places itself outside the shared beat. The repetition of the sound beat, once enacted by bodies, produces a shared rhythm that is the basis of the socialization of the experience. This brings us back, by another route, to Stefani's (1998) concept of rhythmic conduct: in collective participation in the same musical event, in experiencing the same rhythm as the basis of socialization, the sound-aesthetic figures that each person expresses are never purely individual, but are produced within a field of minimal synchronization that makes them recognizable and contagious.

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It is precisely this synchronization that allows figurative contagion to function. Without a shared tempo, the movement of one body could not be taken up by another as a repetition, but would remain an isolated gesture. Synchronization, in other words, is not an accessory function of dance but its condition of collective possibility. It must be acknowledged, however, that rhythmic synchronization as a principle of the 'we' is not in itself specific to techno: it applies to tango, milonga, hora, stadium chants, and in general to any situation of collective listening to music. A particularly relevant feature of techno in this respect is the minimalism of its pulse: with melodic accents placed in the background, techno's iterated pulse constitutes a threshold for synchronization that is much lower than those required by other dance music. By comparison, participation in tango as a codified dance presupposes figurative and narrative skills – steps, the embrace, pauses, and melodic lines – whereas synchronization with techno's minimal beat can begin with little more than bodily movement in time with the repeated pulse. The collective actor of the dancefloor is thus a 'we' with a low threshold of codification, which does not require access to a shared choreographic skill but only the body's willingness to fall in step with the repeated beat. It is an interaction that occurs at a lower level of the code, and it is precisely this characteristic that produces a distinctly social music and, if we think in terms of dancing ability, a decidedly democratic one.

4.3. **The solidary touch**

The third articulation of repetition unfolds on the level of touch. Touch, however, does not constitute a homogeneous category on the dancefloor. At least three configurations become pertinent, distinguishable according to intentionality, reciprocity, and consent.

In the passageways of the dancefloor, contact is often collisive: it is generated accidentally by the movement of one body and undergone by another without reciprocal uptake. It is generally valued dysphorically, as a form of annoyance that introduces discontinuity into the continuity of the aesthetic experience:

> I like it when I find the rhythm I close my eyes I just stand there I dance I'm not thinking about anything and then there are moments when like I don't know someone walks past me and shoves me for a sec it pisses me off (Danika)

Collisive touch must in turn be distinguished from non-consensual contact. In this case, unidirectionality is no longer accidental: unwanted touches, groping, and harassment constitute asymmetrical configurations in which one body actively seeks contact with another that has neither requested nor reciprocated it. This modality also belongs to the pragmatics of the dancefloor and is the object of the self-regulatory practices through which these scenes become politicized, particularly those aimed at distinguishing and preventing non-consensual contact.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0006 | **punctum.gr**

The configuration relevant to repetition is different again. In the high-density zones of the dancefloor, particularly near the speakers or the DJ booth, touch can become reciprocal and iterative: two or more bodies take up one another's contact as if exchanging a caress, a brushing against one another.

> As soon as I'm inside with Sandro, I really notice the shift in the situation near the speakers […] But it is not just the density and heat: the radical proximity in which we have become entangled cannot but produce a whole network of points of contact around us. They are not collisions; it is more like our hips rubbing against one another, as if we were caressing each other in time with the music. (Bologna, 2/4/22)
>
> But anyway [that MDMA] was so good that like it didn't bother me to be touched by other people actually at one point I went right up under the speakers and rubbing against the others felt damn good I was getting chills and I think the person next to me too even though I didn't know them eh I think the person next to me felt the same way because nobody pulled back from the rubbing (Karl)
>
> Veronika took a quarter of an LSD tab and half an Ecstasy pill. […] she tells me "I'm all shivers". […] she tells me a guy in front of her had his jacket wrapped around his waist and she enjoyed being brushed by it, said it felt in sync with the music, and that all this heightened her shivers of pleasure. (Bologna, 15/3/25)

This caressing in time with the music suggests what we might call a formal homology between touch and the musical loop: what we could define as 'solidary touch,' precisely because it helps people emphasize the pleasure derived from the synchronization of related elements; it is structured like a sound loop because it repeats and because, in its repetition, it generates difference. Its reciprocity – the fact that both bodies touch and are touched within the same movement – gives this iterative structure a specifically intersomatic form. It is a mutual exchange in which touching increases the pleasure of both: a giving that, by taking nothing away from anyone, guides and directs the exercise of a sought-after reciprocity.

The relevance of the formal homology between touch and the loop becomes particularly evident by contrast with configurations in which tactile reciprocity does not stabilize. Collisive and non-consensual contacts are not failed versions of solidary touch: what distinguishes the latter is that contact is reciprocally taken up and repeated, acquiring an iterative form in which repetition generates variation. Reciprocity adds a specifically intersomatic dimension to this tactile loop, since both bodies touch and are touched within the same movement. This third articulation highlights

the semiotic modes through which repetition structures a dimension that exceeds simple formal iteration: it produces a tactile solidarity that redistributes eroticism across the entire bodily surface, undermining the hegemony of the specific zones traditionally targeted and partially liberating pleasure from hierarchical and genitalized sexualization (Petrilli 2020; see Garcia-Mispireta 2023).

5. Succession

The 'succession' operator, on the other hand, highlights what can be considered another particularly salient feature of collective techno listening: the uninterrupted flow of its unfolding. It takes the form of an unlimited continuum (Agostini 1998) and an expansion of the present, resulting in the 'eradication of time' (Salvatore 1998; cf. Wark 2023), according to the typical form of modulation whereby an element transforms without ceasing to be what it is (Paolucci 2010). Here too, this operator does not merely define the sonic dimension of the musical event but, by the same logic, also articulates the somatic-collective dimension.

5.1. The thermokinetic modulation

In the collective listening experience of techno, dancing is also pertinent as a practice in which movement, heat, bodily density, spatial proximity, and the effects of substances enter reciprocal determination. None of these elements acts as the origin of a linear sequence: depending on the contingent configuration, movement may make heat prevalent, heat may modify the way movement or the effects of substances are experienced, and these may in turn transform the modes of moving and approaching other bodies. The ethnographic material does not therefore document a stable chronology, but a thermokinetic network whose elements reinforce, inhibit, or redirect one another:

> It's really hot […] I do the same to figure out why, and I'll be just as baffled as them – I get their bewilderment: they don't seem to be working. Yet it seems clear that they're on […] But it really is hot, so I decide to take off my shirt and tuck it into my jeans like a belt. I do this also because it's keeping me from moving freely, especially from raising my arms: at first, I feel a bit "restricted" in my movement, but once I take it off I experience a total sense of freedom. (Paris, 27/7/22)
>
> Almost all of us are moving toward the speakers and bit by bit we close ranks. The first effects are already showing: people getting closer and closer to them, and the heat starting to spread – whether from the drugs, the music, or the movement. If before it was unbearably cold, now you start seeing the first people peeling off one layer after another, layers they'd taken refuge in to

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0006 | **punctum.gr**

> fight the (relatively) freezing temperatures that now seem to have practically vanished. […] if before we were huddled around the fire to keep warm as the only way to survive while complaining about the cold, now while someone takes off jackets and then sweatshirts you hear 'oh, can't you feel how hot it is?' (Bologna, 17/9/22)
>
> The difference is striking, way too obvious not to count as data: the closer you got to the speakers, the more the density of bodies had created a really pleasant microclimate of warmth, and people were moving almost in unison, like one single body, as if everyone was inhaling and exhaling at the same time. Then just stepping out of those tight clusters was enough to feel the temperature drop: the further away you got the less dense the space became, less density meant less heat, and less heat basically meant one obvious thing: people were moving much less. (Roma, 8/4/22)

These ethnographic accounts provide different points of access to the same relational network. In each case, a different relation becomes temporarily prevalent: the removal of clothing makes the relation between thermal perception and freedom of movement pertinent; bodily density brings heat and collective movement to the fore; spatial displacement makes their reciprocal modulation perceptible. These are not successive phases of a single process, but local configurations in which one relation acquires temporary prevalence and renders the others readable. *Thermokinesis* designates precisely this mutual determination among heat, movement, bodily density, spatial disposition, and the situated effects of substances.

The reference to thermodynamics has a heuristic rather than explanatory function. It does not establish an identity between physical and semiotic processes, nor does it reduce the dancefloor to a mechanical system. It makes a formal relation pertinent: variations in the movement and density of bodies correspond, within the observed configurations, to variations in the thermal state of the dancefloor, while the latter becomes one of the conditions through which movement, proximity, and the effects of substances are experienced. Musical succession and thermokinetic modulation are therefore not manifestations of the same process, but heterogeneous series made comparable by their continuous transformation.

5.2. Intersubjective conduction

Within this network, heat becomes intersubjectively perceptible through proximity and contact. Conduction will be used here not as a physiological explanation, but as a formalization of the way in which participants render the presence of other bodies pertinent to their own experience. Their movement, density, and warmth can become sought-after conditions for organizing the effects of music and substances, as in the following example:

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> Sandro [who had taken MDMA] makes his way into the crowd gathering at the side of the stage in front of a speaker. After a while I follow him […]. He doesn't seem satisfied […]. There's definitely also the crowd-and-density component. I mean, he physically slid himself in among the people who were there, people he didn't know at all, in an almost unconscious search for contact – because clearly he felt the high coming on but couldn't bring 'the effects into a system' the way he wanted. He went deep into the crowd precisely in search of warmth. (Bologna, 2/4/22)

The phrase 'bring the effects into a system' is semiotically valuable: it indicates that the effects, to acquire the expected and desired value, require a relational configuration capable of containing them, and that this configuration is also an effect of bodily density. For Sandro, the search for the crowd is not adequately explained by a generic taste for sociality. Within this configuration, the warmth and proximity of other bodies become necessary for organizing the effects of music and substances and for completing their pleasurable value. Conduction is therefore not taken as the physical cause of an otherwise individual experience, but as the form through which continuity among bodies, musical flow, and altered perception becomes pertinent. Thermal conduction, in other words, reveals itself here as semiotic conduction: continuity between one body and another becomes pertinent in a form homologous to the continuity between one musical track and another. The same ethnographic excerpt from Rome, 8/4/22 provides an even more expressive formulation of this continuity: the dense crowd perceived as 'a single body,' which 'breathed in and out at the same time' – a collective actor whose presence is reinforced through thermal and conductive synchronization.

It should be noted that conduction, like thermokinesis, appears here as a threshold-dependent process. The presence of others is not in itself sufficient: within the configurations observed, a certain degree of bodily density is required for proximity, movement, and heat to become mutually pertinent. Sandro and Carmine's accounts of the evening in Bologna on 12/3/22, where the venue was sparsely attended and cold, record converging complaints that the effects did not 'kick in' enough and that the evening 'could have been even cooler if the [venue] had been full.' Their accounts suggest that the attraction of the crowd cannot be reduced to a generic social preference for density: what becomes pertinent is a conductive threshold at which proximity, heat, movement, and the effects of substances acquire a different value. Below this threshold, the thermokinetic relation may fail to acquire the same intensity, while the configuration remains marked by coldness and relative immobility. Intersubjective conduction thus emerges as one of the conditions through which the thermokinetic configuration can acquire its full pleasurable value.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0006 | **punctum.gr**

None of these elements, taken separately, can distinguish techno from related musical practices. Its specificity lies rather in the *intensity*, with which traits belonging more broadly to musical experience are magnified and made mutually pertinent: iterated pulse, uninterrupted succession, amplified vibration, prolonged movement, bodily density, and tactile proximity. Techno is not defined here by an exclusive property, but by an intensive configuration in which these relations can become reciprocally reinforcing.

6. Outcomes and consequences of sensory intensity

The configurations of dance described in the preceding pages show that the effects of meaning reconstructed on the dancefloor are distributed across a plurality of actants, including the DJ, the speakers, psychotropic substances, the bodies of the partygoers, and the music itself. None of them holds hegemony over the successful fulfillment of the pragmatic conditions of textual traversal. Together, these elements configure dance as a somatic translation within a distributed collective configuration. *Repetition* and *succession* organize the analysis of this network and make it possible to distinguish synchronization and touch as functions contributing to the distinctive sociality observed in these events.

While rhythmic synchronization operates through a low threshold of codification, touch makes bodily co-presence particularly salient within the context of an unconscious critique of safety mantras, where "proper distancing" in social settings and venues – even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic – has redefined the experiential design of collective events. Listening to techno is a celebration of presence, not only one's own presence in relation to the musical event, but also in relation to that of others.

One interviewee, describing what she calls an 'out-of-body experience,' adds significantly:

> I really – yes, I felt it – I felt the music, I felt the people around me. […] It was – it was beautiful, above all because I also got feedback from others who had gone through as much as I had (Joyce)

The 'confirmation' from others is what makes it possible as an experience of self. Joyce does not say that she had an intense experience and then realized that others were doing something similar; she says that the experience was what it was because she received confirmation from others.

It should be noted, however, that this configuration of the dancefloor as a field of presence is far from automatic or guaranteed. There are occasions when the

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configuration becomes locally desynchronized, so that the same elements cease to reinforce one another euphorically and begin instead to interfere. Kassandra describes this rupture explicitly as 'a sort of detachment of the music from the sensations of my body,' as if her body 'needed to move at a different rhythm from the one imposed by that kind of music.'

This is the case during an evening in Paris on 25/6/22, when a delayed onset of MDMA's effects coincides as the venue becomes increasingly crowded. Rather than entering into mutual reinforcement, the elements of the configuration become locally desynchronized: the heat that for other partygoers signifies shared progression becomes suffocation for her; bodily density becomes pressure and a need to escape; close touch does not take the form of a repeated caress but of an unassimilable impact. The resulting discomfort is intense enough for Kassandra first to leave the dancefloor and, after briefly considering returning, the party altogether.

The configuration does not cease to exist; rather, the synchronization among its elements fails to stabilize euphorically. The same network of effects is reorganized dysphorically, precisely because of the intensity with which its elements are experienced. The outcomes of participation are therefore neither strictly subjective nor strictly objective, but intersubjective and contingent.

6.1. **Re-subjectivation and anti-practice**

This form of sociality corresponds to an equally specific form of subjectivation. The subject of dance in these events, though there is a wholly personal component, is not the Cartesian self of the modern tradition, capable of constituting itself through autonomous reflection on itself; nor is it its alter ego of postmodern dissolution, which would leave it disintegrated and devoid of constitutive capacity. Rather, it is a self that recognizes itself as such through an echo in others, reconstituting itself in the iterated reciprocity of shared movement. By withdrawing from aesthetic canons to which one must refer and conform, the body of those involved in the practice can free itself from the pressure of submitting to the judgment of others. The complex sensory intensity to which one is subjected brings forth a body where boundaries are extensively renegotiated. One final ethnographic excerpt is particularly illustrative:

> Next to me two people show up who, after slowly drawing close to each other, cling together and start making out hard while dancing and grinding against me in waves. Not sure whether it's the girl or the boy but it doesn't bother me too much and evidently it doesn't bother her/him/them either: it feels good. I don't know if they had noticed my presence, maybe it wasn't important to know whether that body existed or maybe this distinction just wasn't in the range of their contingent sensations – it was all about grinding

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0006 | **punctum.gr**

> between them and, every so often, against me, and their pleasure was probably also defined by grinding against this other body – mine. The music ends, they snap out of it and stop kissing. Then one last track starts up and they go right back to making out hard, and that's when I get it: they're kissing *with* the music, it becomes a third element that slips into mind and body, it's part of their kissing, it fuses them together and in turn fuses with them. Then, at one o'clock sharp, the music cuts off, leaving everyone a bit stunned. (Bologna, 17/9/22)

Here it becomes clear how the perceptual intensity to which one is subjected fosters a comprehensive fusion between subjectivity and the environment, giving rise to a new way of experiencing the world and engaging with it and the entities that inhabit it – and with them, a new way of conceiving of oneself. It is truly fitting to say: one dances to techno.

Thus, as perception is re-hierarchized and redistributed through extra-ordinary pathways of pleasure, the body emerges – less as a substance or image than as a complex of sensations. It is clear that such a high-density relational configuration provides fertile ground for the free experimentation of non-conforming subjectivities; this is precisely because the modulation of sensoriality allows for the development of an epistemic relationship through which one can gain new knowledge of oneself, the environment, and others within a strictly practical, contingent, and pleasure-oriented dimension. This constitutes a re-subjectivation formed through resonance and shared participation, blurring bodies in order to redefine their boundaries.

The suspension of gender/genres described here does not coincide with – and in fact opposes – the 'fluidity' proclaimed by the rhetoric of streaming platforms. As Muchitsch and Werner (2024) have shown, that rhetoric effectively functions as a neoliberal apparatus for the commodification of difference and the individuation of consumers, encoding social identities under the guise of transcending them. In contrast, the suspension described here is situated, contingent, and ethnographically attested: it is not a general overcoming of gender categories, but rather their localized non-relevance within the circumscribed field of the dancefloor.

The difference is one of both scale and direction: where the Spotify apparatus solidifies identities by producing increasingly granular categories, the rave apparatus de-substantializes them by suspending the very relevance of those categories. These are two opposing semiotic apparatuses, even though both deal with the relationship between musical genre and social identity; from this perspective, the practice of the dancefloor can be read as a theoretically invaluable limit-case that clarifies exactly what platforms do – and what they fail to do.

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The dancefloor thus configures itself as a delimited, somewhat liminal space-time in which a different form of life (Fontanille 2015) is realized primarily as a local and contingent fact, rendering visible the non-necessity of what seems mandatory outside of it and making another possible sociality concrete. The subversion of the sensory hierarchy – the downsizing of the 'hegemony of the visible' that characterizes Western philosophy (Macnaghten and Urry 1998) in favor of a distributed thermokinetic tactility – is not a mere redistribution of the senses but a reconstitution of the very categories founded upon the sensible. It is within this articulation that the political dimension of participation becomes analytically tangible, as a meaning effect produced contingently within the network of relations described above.

But there is also a further outcome – this time concerning a dimension strictly tied to the amount of energy involved in this mode of dancing – which, by virtue of its low entry threshold, renders it almost a vast collective ritual. But what significance does this ritual hold? Alongside the strictly performative dimension of dance, the dancefloor hosts a dimension of pure 'playful waste' (Eco 2002) which, partly in relation to the use of psychotropic substances, restores the body to a non-utilitarian functionality.

Numerous ethnographic accounts highlight how the ability to roll a joint, tie a jacket, or even tie one's shoes – the latter a gesture of quintessential simplicity – becomes impossible to perform due to the intensity of that *saisie esthétique* (aesthetic seizure) resulting from the network of effects we have attempted to describe. These instances are, for all intents and purposes, signs of the body's withdrawal from the ordinary economy of its performance. In an era where the rationality of valorization across all domains of human sociality (Dardot and Laval 2013) maintains its hegemony – especially within Western societies – the liberation from a utilitarian scheme of movement (and of 'work' understood, drawing again from physics, as energy exchanged between two systems when displacement occurs through the action of a force) takes on a meaning that exceeds the strictly sensory aspect.

The withdrawal of the body and its energy from the ordinary economy of performance, technical incapacity as a sign of a body refusing to be an integral part of a productive system, and mutual aid as an ordinary way of being together: these three operations, taken together, form a situated counter-configuration to neoliberal rationality and define the contours of a collective refusal. This represents a shift in the semantic field and its axiologies. Just as the choreographic, proxemic, and gender/genre classifications are suspended by the configuration described in the preceding sections, so too is the matrix of valorization – the fundamental classificatory apparatus of the body in late-capitalist societies – suspended. Ultimately, it is within this suspension as a contingent effect that the political stakes of a re-subjectivation oriented toward the refusal of utilitarianism are played out.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Performing masculinity: A Fontanillean semiotic reading of Dimitris Papaioannou's *2*

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BY: **Daphne Mourelou**

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Dimitris Papaioannou's dance-theater performance *2* (2006) through Jacques Fontanille's six-level semiotic model (2008), mapping the work from minimal signs to broader forms of cultural life to reveal its ideological orientation. Applying Fontanille's six levels - Signs, Texts/Utterances, Objects/Supports, Practices/Scenes, Strategies and Forms of Life - the analysis shows how *2* functions as a multi-layered semiotic system that deconstructs conventional masculinity, exposing its fragility and contradictions. Although *2* follows a non-linear narrative, its fragmented images and atmospheres produce a coherent aesthetic and semiotic effect through strongly visual staging that combines movement, music, speech, and song with shifting sets and props. The work revolves around the themes of existential loneliness, identity crisis, desire, male sexuality, communication deficit, objectification and alienation, placing the Mediterranean male within contemporary, urban modernity. Its all-male cast, wide use of modern settings (airport, office, gym) and contemporary pop culture references (videogames, mainstream film, football, Greek bouzoukia) frame masculinity as a constructed, performative identity. Ultimately, *2* exposes the social construction of male identity from childhood to adulthood, negotiating individual agency and the potential of alternative masculinities.

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1. Introduction

Dance performances constitute complex semiotic events in which meaning is produced through movement, spatial organization, visual elements and cultural conventions. Dance translates natural movement into symbolic expression through culturalization and abstraction, allowing for multiple interpretations (Blănariu 2013, Rochelle 2015). In this context of semiosis, the body functions as more than a mere biological entity; it acts as a semiotic scheme that mediates between physical substance and symbolic meaning. To analyze these processes, this study adopts a socio-semiotic framework grounded primarily in the multi-level semiotic model developed by Jacques Fontanille (2008) for an analytical approach to the performance *2* by the Greek choreographer and director Dimitris Papaioannou.

2 is a work that explores the male psyche and human solitude through a series of surreal vignettes. Premiering on November 24, 2006, at the Pallas Theatre in Athens, *2* was Papaioannou's first major stage work after his globally acclaimed direction of the 2004 Athens Olympic ceremonies. *2* was a massive commercial success while at the same time, sparked a notable controversy within the Athenian and Greek society.[1] It is a visually driven, non-linear performance piece that unfolds as a sequence of striking stage images in which performers continuously reshape themselves and each other, creating hybrid forms that blur distinctions between human and non-human. The number "2" functions symbolically, suggesting pairs, oppositions and interdependence - core ideas that structure the piece's visual and conceptual language. In this process, the different scenic environments that develop on-stage often suggest various social environments in which the male identity is formed.

Dimitris Papaioannou is a central figure in contemporary Greek performance, known for his distinctive fusion of dance, theatre and visual art. Over time he gained both national and international recognition, particularly after directing the opening and closing ceremonies of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 which established his global reputation (Tzintziloni 2013). Co-founder of Edafos Company in 1986, established with the dancer and choreographer Aggeliki Stellatou, they shaped a new performance language that emphasized slow, controlled movement, strong visual imagery and the expressive potential of the body. Edafos Company gradually gained great status and recognition within the Greek art field (Tzintziloni 2013: 241). Influenced by butoh, release techniques and his background in visual arts and comics, Papaioannou's work focused less on technical dance and more on energy, transformation, and emotional resonance. His artistic path reflects a combination of high art and underground culture, as well as his personal experience as a homosexual man in a society marked by strict gender norms (Tzintziloni 2013).

[1] https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2#:~:text=Looking%20back%20at%20the%20record%2D-breaking%20success%20of,the%20piece%20as%20it%20was%20being%20created

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2. Theoretical framework and objective

Jacques Fontanille's framework conceptualizes meaning production as operating across six interconnected levels – from signs and texts to practices and forms of life. In his seminal work *Pratiques sémiotiques* (2008), Jacques Fontanille proposes a stratified model of six hierarchical levels to analyze the generation of meaning within cultural and social systems. The Signs operate as the basic level constituting the elementary units of expression, which coalesce into Texts that organize them into coherent, signifying wholes. This structure expands into the level of Objects, where materiality and physical affordances dictate how meaning is embodied. These objects are then activated through Practices, representing the lived, temporal dimension of semiotic action. At a more complex social scale, these practices are organized into Strategies, which govern interpersonal interactions and goal-oriented behaviors. Finally, the model culminates in Forms of Life, the integrative level that synthesizes the preceding layers into a coherent existential 'style' or ethical consistency that defines an individual or collective identity. Essentially, forms of life describe the cultural, social, existential totalities-ways of living- that embed the strategies, practices, objects, texts and signs.

Within Fontanille's semiotic hierarchy, the body acts as the foundational perceptual anchor that bridges biological matter with cultural meaning. At the level of Objects, the body is treated as a material entity with specific affordances and resistances, while at the level of Practices, it functions as the active agent of temporalized movement. Most importantly, the body is central to Forms of Life, where its gestures and postures coalesce into a coherent existential 'style' or ethos. Fontanille emphasizes the concept of the 'flesh' as the sensitive interface where internal sensations meet external stimuli, suggesting that semiosis is an embodied process where meaning is not just thought, but physically felt and enacted (Fontanille 2008).

To supplement the main framework for the specific purposes of this analysis, the study integrates insights from the genealogical analysis of power by Michel Foucault (2020), the theory of embodied social dispositions developed by Pierre Bourdieu (2013) and the performativity theory articulated by Judith Butler (1990). Together, these perspectives enable a multi-layered analysis of how meaning, social norms and subjectivities are produced, reproduced, and contested within cultural practices. While Fontanille's model offers a structured approach to semiotic analysis across multiple scales, the contributions of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Butler are used to illuminate further the historical, social, and performative dynamics that underpin these processes. Together, they can offer a nuanced understanding of how cultural meanings are constructed, embodied and contested. Furthermore, to specifically address gendered embodiment, this framework incorporates the theory of masculinities developed by R. W. Connell (1995). Connell's model conceptualizes masculinity not as a fixed identity, but as a configuration of social practices embedded within power

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

relations, formulating hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities. This perspective enables the analysis to examine how the dance performance negotiates and ultimately, challenges dominant gender norms.

From a Foucauldian perspective, structures are inseparable from historically specific regimes of power/knowledge. Michel Foucault's (2020) genealogical method shifts the analysis away from fixed meanings toward the historical production of norms, revealing how bodies are disciplined through diffuse mechanisms such as institutions, discourses and everyday practices. Within this framework, the signs and practices identified in the performance can be understood not merely as expressive elements but as effects of power that regulate and normalize masculinity. Spaces seen in the performance such as the gym, the corporate office, or even the toilet function as micro-sites of discipline where bodies are trained, observed and corrected. Pierre Bourdieu's (2013) theory of habitus deepens the analysis of embodiment by emphasizing how social structures are internalized as durable, embodied dispositions. Habitus operates below the level of conscious intention, organizing gestures, postures, and movements in ways that appear natural but are socially conditioned. In this sense, recurring bodily motifs—such as athleticism, controlled physicality, and gendered comportment—can be understood as manifestations of a masculine habitus. Bourdieu's concept of capital, particularly physical capital, further clarifies how the body becomes a site of accumulation and display. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity introduces a crucial destabilizing dimension. For Butler, gender is not an inherent essence but the effect of reiterated acts that cite and reproduce normative frameworks. Gender depends on repetition and it is always open to variation, failure, and subversion. Moments of ambiguity, contradiction, or breakdown in the performance – such as androgynous embodiments or disrupted communication patterns – can thus be interpreted as sites where the constructed nature of masculinity becomes visible. Furthermore, to specifically address gendered embodiment, this framework incorporates R. W. Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities. Connell conceptualizes masculinity not as a unified or fixed identity, but as a configuration of social practices structured through power relations. Connell's model distinguishes between hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how different masculine forms coexist, compete and are hierarchically organized. This perspective is particularly productive for examining how the performance stages multiple masculinities simultaneously – ranging from dominant, hyper-masculine expressions to vulnerable, queer, or marginalized forms – thereby exposing internal tensions and contradictions within the gender order.

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Taken together, these theoretical perspectives support Fontanille's semiotic model for the purposes of this analysis. Michel Foucault foregrounds the historical and disciplinary production of subjects, Pierre Bourdieu explains the embodied internalization of social norms, Judith Butler reveals the performative and unstable nature of identity and R. W. Connell provides a framework for understanding the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities. Their integration transforms semiotic analysis into a critical and interdisciplinary tool capable of examining not only how masculinity is represented, but how it is produced, negotiated and potentially contested within specific socio-cultural contexts. The application of the rich semiotic conceptual toolkit to the study of dance has already been undertaken. Susan Leigh Foster's (1986) work was seminal in discussing dance within a semiotic context, outlining four distinct models for representation. Furthermore, attention has been paid to the gender perception of homosocial dance (Beller-Tadiar 2025), the construction of gender in the context of dance courses (Peterson and Anderson 2012; Henderson 2019), constructions of male dances (Basetti 2013), among others. Valeria De Luca's (2017, 2021) work demonstrates that dance provides a valuable field for semiotic investigation, revealing how meaning is produced through bodily interaction in the case of Argentine tango. The Romanian scholar Nicoleta Popa Blănariu has been particularly active in this line of research, tackling a variety of subjects (2013), primarily relying on a Saussurean framework (2019), and only occasionally combining individual concepts from Fontanille's theory with cognitive linguistics (2021). The present study aims to contribute to the growing body of semiotic scholarship on dance with special focus on the performative construction of masculinity in the context of Greek contemporary dance-theater, a subject that remains understudied.

3. A Fontanillean semiotic reading of *2*

3.1. **Signs level**

According to Fontanille, Signs are the most basic semiotic elements operating as minimal signifying units (2008). The signs constitute the very elementary level of expression, the minimal semiotic units endowed with signifying potential defined by their differential relations within a system. At this level, the meaning is not yet organized into larger coherent structures, however, the signs already point to the basic thematic anchor of this work which is contemporary masculinity.

For the purposes of this analysis, the arrangement of the minimal semiotic elements in *2* may be organized in the following categories:

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

a) Body modes and designs. The gestural code of the performance (De Marinis 1993: 98) is rich and revolves around the main theme. The visual and performative language is articulated through a series of distinct body modes and physical designs such as the merging of two male figures into a single entity, as well as the dynamic of one body supporting while the other engages in 'float-running.' Physical actions range from the athletic energy of football running and kicking to the raw, private acts of masturbation and urination. Traditional movements like the *Tsifteteli* dance are juxtaposed with the disciplined forms of martial arts and push-ups. The physical presence is further marked by the exposure of the male form, bodies sliding or being carried away, and the psychological detachment of the protagonist's alienated gaze.

b) Symbolic objects. The visual landscape is constructed through a dense assembly of symbolic objects and material signs. Professional identifiers like suits, offices, bags and suitcases are juxtaposed with icons of pop culture and gender, such as a giant Barbie doll and a one high-heel shoe. The setting is defined by structural elements like a conveyor belt segment, an inclined plane and blocks that hide and reveal, alongside everyday items such as a broom, trash bins, lighters, mobile phones and balloons. Athletic and subcultural life is represented through footballs, player uniforms, gym weight-lifting bars, boxes of anabolic steroids and energy drinks, as well as helmets, motorcycles and fast cars. These are interspersed with objects of consumption and habit – pizza, Sprite refreshment, coffee, cigarettes, worry beads (or *komboloi*)[2] – and marked by a sense of fragility or danger through a box marked as 'Fragile,' white gloves, toy/real weapons and a bomb.

c) Aural and music fragments. The auditory landscape is composed of a diverse collection of aural fragments and musical signs: surreal Google Maps instructions in multiple languages appear alongside the synthesized sounds of video-game shooting and punching. Elements of the corporate environment, such as office directions and automated voicemail prompts

[2] The *komboloi* or Greek worry beads, is a circular string of beads serving as an accessory for relaxation and stress relief, but most importantly as a distinctive cultural symbol of traditional Greek masculinity, often associated with the Rebetiko subculture and the *manga* ragged male persona.

[3] The origins of 'Misirlou' lie in the diverse musical melting pot of the Eastern Mediterranean during the Ottoman era, where it circulated as a traditional folk melody shared by Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Jewish communities. The title itself – meaning 'Egyptian girl' in Turkish – reflects its cross-cultural roots, with early lyrics depicting a forbidden romance. Ultimately, the song became part of the popular culture through Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction*.

are layered with cinematic pop-culture quotes like Arnold Schwarzenegger's *'I'll be back.'* The soundscape includes the *Misirlou*[3] theme as well as a fragmented, repetitive version of the *Love Story* theme used as a ringtone. The aural landscape is further punctuated by wild screams, distorted male voices, and sounds of refreshment consumption. Urban textures – including construction noise and car engines – mingle with *Tsifteteli*[4] music and explosions, all while the recurring motif of navigation instructions shifts between the surreal and the realistic.

d) The visual design consists of specific lighting and video projections. Projections frame scenes such as the explosion and the fireworks, while the final scene is defined by the image of the sky. The lighting palette includes 'boyish' blue light, green office light, white hammam light, red light for the androgynous figure and mobile phone screen light.

3.2. **Text level: Structure and main motifs**

In this level we can extract units of meaning that are articulated through the internal cohesion and arrangement of the signs (Fontanille 2008), which will lead to a more complete account of how the basic thematic units are constructed at the next levels. The Text level refers to how segments are organized into a formal, expressive whole. These texts, in the broad semiotic sense, assemble signs into coherent (or in this case, deliberately incoherent) units of meaning.

Structure-wise, *2* uses a cinematic text-structure (*fondu enchaîné*) where one image emerges from another and is subsumed by the next (Thalassa 2018: 122). In a broader understanding of textuality within the semiotics of performance, we may consider as 'text' every unit of discourse that results from coexistence of several codes and possesses the constitutive prerequisites of completeness and coherence. According to this understanding of textuality, an image or a group of images can be considered as such (De Marinis 1993: 47). This creates a 'fluid text' that mirrors the atmosphere of a dream rather than a logical-linear sequence of events, drawing

[4] Tsifteteli originated as a traditional rhythm and dance in Asia Minor and the broader Ottoman Empire, shared for centuries by Greek, Turkish and Arabic communities, characterized by its syncopated 2/4 or 4/4 rhythm and fluid body movements.

[5] The theatre critic Dio Kangelary notes in her review of *2*: 'Bisected beings search among the swarming masses for their other halves, seeking the severed segments of their very selves – to "make one of two" in the words of Plato's Symposium. They strive for the time when two people were joined in a single body with one head, two faces, four legs and as many arms, and when there were three sexes – the male (of the sun), the female (of the earth), and the "androgynous" sex (of the moon); creatures like those monstrous forms created by the bodies of two dancers (first seen in the work of conceptualist choreographers), or the duo who suddenly come together and try to fit into the same set of clothes.' This text was especially commissioned for the '2' DVD booklet https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

directly from Pina Bausch's dance-theatre dream-like articulation and Robert Wilson's optical storyboards (Thalassa 2018: 31). As Thalassa points, in his later works Papaioannou creates a collage of images with no climax, broadening the scope of the audience's reception (Thalassa 2018: 121). Most prominent images in *2* include: the airport, a corporate environment, a playground, a hammam, Greek bouzoukia, a gym. These settings organize the basic contexts of meaning that evoke themes such as existential loneliness, identity crisis, gender, desire, male sexuality, the crave for intimacy, communication deficit and alienation.

Within these images certain core-signs of the performance's gestural code (De Marinis 1993: 98) are used as repetitive motifs with variations producing the main theme of duality. The motif of intertwined bodies is used as a physical expression of duality, evoking Greek mythology and philosophy, following a strategy of juxtaposing elements from different historical periods of Greece and contemporary culture. Intertwined bodies point directly to Aristophane's speech on Eros as developed in Plato's Symposium. Aristophanes speaks of the primordial human as two bodies in one whole, who's strength was so big that threatened the god's status quo. As such, Zeus split the primordial human into two separate beings that immediately started longing for their other half to become whole again. Through this story Aristophanes argues that humanity is a product of the tension and consequent collision between the original 'pre-human' nature, and the humanizing constrains of convention (Berg 2010: 71-74). This reference also signals one of the core themes of *2*, namely, the tension between the nature and social structures. Nature here is seen as a lost Eden, presented in the introduction by a man with a leaf over his genital area taking a bite from an apple, then throwing it away and getting dressed slowly, indicating his entrance into the social world.

A motif that is frequently used to visualize this tension is running against the flow or towards something placed very high and ultimately, being taken by the flow or giving into gravity and sliding back down. Examples here include running to the opposite direction of the conveyor belt's flow and ultimately falling, frantic running on the inclined plane and sliding back down. Highlighting the theme of duality through the urge for intimacy, communication and the search for a life-partner, other motifs include two men crossing paths or trying to meet, two men dancing simultaneously with a wall/walls in-between and also, spatial tension (Preston-Dunlop 2014: 135) between two men that indicates distance but at the same time, some form of connection. These motifs underlie the theme of unfulfilled longing and point to the two beings after the separation, as described in Aristophane's speech.

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Figure 1. Dual figure from the opening section
Source: https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/

3.3. Objects and supports level

Objects are the material or technical supports of semiosis in which texts are inscribed, embodied, or operationalized (Fontanille 2008). The object level introduces material constraints, affordances and modes of manipulation that condition meaning production and interpretation, materially grounding the signifying process. As such, at the object level meaning is grounded in material supports that enable, constrain and orient action.

The basic scenographic devices of *2* function as operative elements that organize movement, visibility and spatial continuity. The devices fulfilling this purpose are the two moving walkways and an inclined plane located at the rear of the stage. Furthermore, throughout the performance the scenic space undergoes continuous transformation to evoke the various locations required. These locations are delineated primarily through the exclusive use of specific tableaux, namely, rectangular slabs resembling office cutting surfaces carried onstage by the performers, as well as through other everyday objects that contribute both to the spatial articulation and to the development of the action. Finally, these three scenic elements – the moving walkways, the inclined plane and the tableaux – also function to frame the human body, to enable the appearance and concealment of performers and objects from the spectators and to provide continuity, flow, and mobility in the transitions between scenes, while simultaneously operating on a symbolic level (Thalassa 2018: 124). Furthermore, video projections add an extra visual layer in the performative text with images such as a bomb explosion, fireworks and the blue sky of the final scene.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

Across the performance, scenic objects operate as condensed semiotic units that structure the dramaturgy of action and the spatial organization of the stage, mediating relations of mobility, containment, interaction and exposure among the performers. In Fontanille's analytical framework, this level corresponds to the semiotics of objects where material elements operate as mediators between signs and embodied practices. In *2*, objects do not function merely as decorative scenographic elements, rather, they actively participate in the choreographic system by organizing movement, directing attention and shaping the visual configuration of bodies within space. Objects in this sense do not simply carry symbolic meaning, but they also structure the conditions of action by enabling or constraining the movements that performers execute. As such, objects in *2* are not just a physical support of signs but contribute as an active component in semiosis. Semiotic forms here constitute dynamic processes rather than fixed structures; therefore, materiality is regarded as a constitutive dimension of semiosis, participating directly in the generation and stabilization of meaning (De Luca 2021).



Figure 2. Bodies sliding down the inclined plane, two men with suitcases.
Source: https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/

A first group of objects organizes movement and spatial circulation on stage. Movable suitcases mark the transfer of objects and bodies while producing a continuous sense of motion and displacement. Beds introduce temporary zones of stillness and separation between performers, interrupting the fluid circulation of bodies. A second group of objects operates through weight, accumulation, or physical resistance in relation to the body. Large boxes containing everyday consumables are stacked upon the protagonist until they collapse over him producing a visual configuration in which the body is subjected to the pressure of material accumulation. These boxes operate as containers of identity, suggesting masculinity as something packaged, transported, and managed. Similarly, a weight-lifting bar lifted by performers foregrounds muscular effort and accumulation of physical capital. Footballs

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circulating between performers function both as objects of athletic interaction and as floating elements within the stage environment. A third group of objects operates as extension or transformation of the body. White gloves animating isolated hands produce the impression of disembodied gestures, while a wheelchair carrying a disabled Superman juxtaposes the iconography of heroic masculinity with bodily immobility. In another moment, a bomb attached to a performer's torso visually merges object and body, altering the performer's physical configuration within the scene. Other objects appear in ways that carry symbolic or ironic implications, including a broom attached to a performer's genital area and a leaf covering the performer's genitals. Additionally, television frames displaying male faces act as multiple representations of masculinity with extending references to popular culture. A fourth group of objects support actions structuring small-scale gestures that contrast with the broader spatial dynamics of the performance. These objects do not organize large movement sequences but instead, enable micro-performative acts that concentrate attention on the performer's body and on subtle interactions between hand, object, and gesture. The protagonist is forcefully given a *komboloi* to play with, while a mobile phone functions as the device through which his spoken words are transmitted. The repeated ignition of a lighter introduces brief flashes of light that punctuate the performance. Costumes and wearable elements constitute another category of objects that frame the body within recognizable social codes. Performers appear in football uniforms, casual clothing and formal suits, each evoking distinct cultural associations and modes of masculine presentation. Certain items operate relationally between performers, such as a shared jacket worn simultaneously by two bodies. In another instance, a high-heeled shoe worn by an androgynous figure introduces a visual element that destabilizes normative gender coding within the predominantly male environment of the stage.



Figure 3. Two men trying to come close while running to the opposite direction of the conveyor belt, momentary contact with lighter and a cigarette
Sources: https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/ , Thalassa, C., 2018.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

Among the objects appearing in the performance, the large Barbie doll occupies a distinctive position due to its strong cultural connotations and its central role in structuring action. Unlike objects that primarily organize spatial movement or everyday gestures, the Barbie figure functions as a symbolically charged object toward which bodily actions are oriented. The oversized doll introduces an immediately recognizable icon of femininity within a stage environment otherwise dominated by male bodies. Its presence produces a visual contrast that foregrounds gender representation at the level of material form.

Taken together, these objects form a dense material network that structures the performance's semiotic environment. At this level, they configure the material conditions under which movement becomes possible. At the same time, their manipulation by performers already anticipates the next analytical level – practices – where these object-mediated interactions become stabilized as repeated bodily actions. In this way, the objects of the performance function as interfaces between material scenography and embodied choreography, linking the spatial organization of the stage with the social and cultural meanings generated through the performers' actions.

3.4. **Scenes / Practices level: Masculinity as enacted social action**

At the level of scenes and practices meaning emerges from organized, situated action governed by implicit norms, values and expectations (Fontanille 2008). Here, the material affordances provided by objects are activated through bodily practices and masculinity appears as a mode of doing rather than an attribute. The bodily practices develop through a concrete gestural code – the convention/s on the basis of which the gestures in a performance signify and communicate their meaning (De Marinis 1993: 98) – that evokes the main themes of the performance.

The scenic environments created on stage function as semiotic configurations that frame the process of masculine identity formation. The airport signifies a journey, operating as a metaphor for movement toward subjectivation and identity construction within the conditions of contemporary society. The corporate environment represents male-dominated professional spaces aligned with stereotypical models of masculine success and legitimacy, highlighting how the labor market shapes masculinity (Connell 1995: 95). The playground functions as a return to childhood, directly referencing normative expectations that regulate boys' behavior and define the toys and activities deemed appropriate for them, often privileging violence and speed. Here, the rhythmic slaps the protagonist receives and then mimics show that gender is built through repetition. This cycle directly links the performance of gender (Butler 1990) to acts of violence. The hammam appears as a space of cleansing and corporeal exposure, opening the possibility for homoerotic expression while simultaneously engaging with traditional masculine practices.

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This approach seems to align with Pasin's (2014) analysis of the Ottoman Turkish hammam conceptualized as a queered space, where the boundaries of heteronormativity are negotiated, contested and occasionally transgressed. Pasin's reading highlights how spaces of homosocial interaction may simultaneously reproduce and disrupt dominant sexual norms. In this respect, Pasin argues that the spatial and sexual practices in the men's section of the hammam are much more complex than in the way they are conceived, represented and coded in popular media. Marginalized masculinities (Connell 1995: 80-81) are evoked through culturally specific objects such as the komboloi and the cigarette within the context of the hammam, again with Turkish/Eastern references, which signal forms of masculinity rooted in the socially marginalized rebetes and the figure of the macho traditional man (*mangas*). Greek bouzoukia constitute the symbolic space of mainstream folk-pop culture in Greece, within which gendered identities are reiterated and stabilized through performative rituals (Koutsougera 2023). Lastly, the gym emerges as the site where physical capital (Bourdieu 1986) is accumulated through repetitive movements like push-ups and weight-lifting, visualizing the disciplined production of bodies aligned with dominant models of masculinity.



Figure 4. The hammam scene
Source: Thalassa, C., 2018.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

Practices of mobility and transition are enacted with the use of bags and suitcases, tracing a masculine trajectory from childhood to adulthood while simultaneously evoking the accumulation of emotional and biographical baggage. This sense of movement is counterbalanced by images of stasis and isolation, such as the placement of two beds apart with suitcases nearby, which foreground loneliness and the burden of personal histories. Urban noises like construction work and car engines create a dense city atmosphere setting the contemporary, metropolitan context as the wider environment in which masculinity is performed. Corporate masculinity emerges through suits and offices which reference male-dominated professional environments governed by legitimate dress codes, productivity and normative expectations of success. Within this framework, the toilet appears as a paradoxical space: on the one hand, it constitutes a private refuge where men momentarily release the tension generated by corporate pressures through masturbation, on the other, it operates a formative site of socio-physical education where boys acquire a legitimate male bodily habitus (Bourdieu 2013), learning how to occupy and discipline their bodies in socially accepted ways by being, for example, prohibited to urinate in a seated position and encouraged to do so in a standing position (Foucault 2020).

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) is further articulated through physical manipulation of objects that index physical capital and bodily power. Weight-lifting bars, large boxes of anabolic steroids and energy drinks signal the accumulation of muscular strength and the visual display of dominance. Footballs and football uniforms reference a sport culturally legitimized as an arena for the enactment of dominant masculinity, while helmets, motorcycles and fast cars associate masculinity with speed, risk, and technological control. Pizza functions as a culturally coded 'male' eating habit associated with football watching, while fast coffee reinforces rhythms of productivity and masculine sociality within urban life. Furthermore, violence and domination appear as central components of this semiotic economy. The juxtaposition of a toy weapon with a real weapon signifies the performative normalization of physical power and aggression from childhood onward, underscoring how toxic forms of masculinity are learned and repeated over time (Butler 1990). A similar logic operates in the pairing of a toy car with a real car, where speed and control parallel the symbolic economy of weapons. This trajectory arrives at its climax in the image of a kamikaze carrying a bomb, which offers a striking visualization of internal struggle and the violent eruption of repressed emotions and unmet needs.

At the same time, the scenes introduce moments of fracture and ambiguity that destabilize normative gender identities. A high-heeled shoe worn with a male suit gesture toward concealed, divided or fluid gender subjectivities, while a shirt shared by two men signifies potential communion and attempts for intimacy. The presence of the large Barbie doll invokes popular culture and operates as a powerful visualization

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of female objectification, whereas the juxtaposition of an androgynous Venus de Milo with the actual image of the statue encloses references to Ancient and contemporary Greek culture, exposing the tension between abstract ideals on gender, physical perfection and lived corporeality. Notably, irony and critique emerge through objects that disrupt masculine coherence. The presence of a box marked 'Fragile' crashing – among others – on the protagonist powerfully exposes the vulnerability underlying dominant male identities, whose authority remains imposed. A broom attached to a man's genital area operates as a symbol of cleansing in the end of the Hammam scene. A trash bin and a balloon seem to symbolize an aspiration toward individual liberation and a non-biased utopia, however, the balloon's repeated placement in the trash bin and its later appearance as consumed and poorly digested signal the failure of this ideal. Practices of homosocial bonding and fleeting intimacy are suggested through smaller, everyday objects. A lighter and a cigarette operate as signs of attempted proximity and communication, while white gloves imply the superficial satisfaction derived from multiple homoerotic encounters. The consumption of Sprite refreshments similarly conveys momentary gratification tied to passive leisure activities such as watching television, emphasizing pleasure as transient and ultimately unfulfilling. Together, these objects and their physical manipulation compose a dense semiotic map of desire, tension, vulnerability and repetition, revealing masculinity as an ongoing, conflicted performance rather as a stable essence.



Figure 5. Men in white gloves
Source: Thalassa, C., 2018.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

The aural and musical landscapes add an additional layer of semiotic meaning to the performance. Particularly striking are the surreal Google Maps instructions delivered in Greek and other languages, suggesting a sense of globalization, disorientation and de-humanized technological prevalence that seem to destabilize the further the process of the search for identity and also, the other half. Navigational directions within a corporate environment a few scenes later, seem to echo this atmosphere. The Google Maps instruction motif re-emerges during the final scene now sounding more realistic, in Greek language, suggesting a tentative shift from chaos toward orientation. In this scene we listen to the dialogue between two men speaking on the phone, one trying to come close to the other. Furthermore, the use of spoken Greek phrases in some cases foregrounds bodily practices and physical habitus formed as an outcome of societal disciplinary forces (Foucault 2020, Bourdieu 2013). The short dialogue that we hear during the corporate environment scene: *"What do you want to do? I want to pee. Standing, please."* accurately highlights the latter.

Iconic pop-culture aural references appear, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger's line from The Terminator, *"Don't worry, I will protect you. I'll be back"*, supplemented by video-game shooting and punching sound effects that accompany the performers' movements. Furthermore, several sound cues highlight themes of miscommunication and communicative failure, including the automated message *"Call waiting has been activated. Please don't hang up unless you hear the busy tone."* This motif is reinforced by repeated phone-ringing sounds and a fragmented, looping version of the *Love Story* theme which feels "stuck," emphasizing emotional and communicative blockage, co-existing with deep and unmet emotional needs. In the final scene, another attempted phone call signals ongoing communicative deficiency, yet this time it appears to hint at potential resolution. Despite this, physical distance and spatial tension between the bodies remain unresolved.

Musical quotations further enrich the soundscape, including the "Misirlou" theme in the Hammam scene and music in a tsifteteli rhythmical pattern during the Greek Bouzoukia scene with the performer singing the lyric *"Πρέπει να γαμήσω γιατί θα λαλήσω"* (*"I need to fuck or I will go crazy"*) invoking raw masculinity, while the exclamation *"Aman"* further reinforces a Turkish/Eastern sonic reference. A distorted male voice singing Elvis Priesley's "Love me tender" creates a deep level of irony during the explicitly raw Barbie doll scene. Also, the reference to Arvo Part's "Für Alina" sets the tone of longing, consolation and even purification.

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3.5. **Strategies level**

At the level of strategies we examine the broader structuring of the performance, namely, how scenes and practices are arranged to produce a coherent (or deliberately fragmented, in this case) aesthetic and semiotic effect (Fontanille 2008). Here, we can distinguish two main categories; content-related and production related strategies.

3.5.1. ***Content-related strategies***

As previously noted, *2* uses a cinematic text-structure (*fondu enchaîné*) where one image emerges from another and is subsumed by the next on stage, creating a 'fluid text' that mirrors the atmosphere of a dream rather than a logical-linear sequence of events. This has also been related to comic-book aesthetics, as Papaioannou had gained early recognition as a painter and comics artist before his focus shifted on the performing arts. The scenes distinctively revolve around a specific theme each and some share common motifs. This strategy seems to be a deliberate choice that further enhances the exposure of disruptions, creating an open-ended environment in terms of reception and, an allegory pointing to social constructions and the fractures/de-constructing potential inherent. In this context, Papaioannou inserts irrational images (e.g., a gentleman pacing without a head, an androgynous figure shooting its own leg) to rupture the rational flow of the performance, symbolically uncovering the structured nature of social doxas and opening the play of interpretations. A similar strategy involves juxtaposing contrasting signs, for example, during the Barbie doll scene when a performer sings the popular love song "Love me tender" with a deep, distorted voice while sexual actions are performed on the doll. Another powerful visual image that is constituted around contrasting signs is the handicapped Superman who enters the stage on a wheelchair and ultimately falls down. Super Men's muscular, hyper-toned bodies are increasingly on display embodying the hegemonic qualities of both the eroticized object and the commanding subject. Even though men are eroticized for the female gaze and one could argue that men and women are equally exploited in this regard, ultimately men's combined powers and authority positions retain privilege (De Dauw and Connell 2020: 11). Papaioannou visually deconstructs the ideal of hegemonic masculinity exposing Superman's fragility and even perhaps drawing a reference to the real, tragic story of Cristopher Reeve who became paraplegic after a horse-riding accident. We can also draw connections here to Lloyd Newson's seminal work *Enter Achilles* (1995), in which he explores contemporary masculinities raising critical questions. Interestingly, Superman is a leading figure in *Enter Achilles*, embodying an alternative representation of masculinity-gentle, non-violent yet not necessarily homosexual, target of bullying and perhaps even a secret aspiration (Wall 2006: 97).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0007 | **punctum.gr**

Pop culture manipulation is a strategy that puts the male in the heart of contemporary environments, demonstrating how this context strongly shapes gendered identities. The performers' appearance with fused TV screens over their heads further highlight the impact of television as a means of the mass diffusion of pop-culture. Through pop culture, constant images of dominant masculinity emerge picturing physical strength, violence, testosterone outbursts and objectification of women. Visual and aural references to Superman and The Terminator constitute such examples. The large Barbie doll emerges in one of the rawest scenes of the performance, indicating how men ultimately come to view women as sexual objects rather than partners. It is worth noting that some reviews of the time perceived as problematic the fact that the only female presence in the performance was a large Barbie doll (Thalassa 2018: 131). This strategy is again reminiscent to Newson's *Enter Achilles*, in which the only female reference is a plastic blow-up sex doll which is used to demonstrate the lack of communication ability towards real women (Wall 2006: 98). As Weissman (1999) notes, the Barbie doll has been a primary example of how women are depicted in the media as objects of the male gaze. Moreover, Barbie's image has been strategically used in consumer culture as a marketing tool towards commodification of beauty, both reflecting and reinforcing cultural norms on gender, beauty and power.



Figure 6. The large Barbie doll
Source: https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/

The strategy of intertwining mainstream masculinity with homoeroticism and queerness, thus, hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (Connel 1995) is also apparent in *2* and broadens the perception of gender, further exposing the disruptions and the fragility of dominant masculinity. One of the most prominent scenes that disrupts dominant masculinity through queerness is the androgynous figure shooting

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its own, high-heeled leg. This action visually communicates the fluidity of gender and the esoteric pressure internalized by the male to suppress any existing feminine attributes, resulting to an internal war.

2 also encompasses the strategy of juxtaposing elements from different historical periods. The context of the contemporary metropolis is associated with mechanization and the pressure of the expectations affiliated with the workplace, highlighting the sense of alienation. Globalization adds an extra layer of confusion questioning the technological impact on the human, possibly mediating further the communication deficit and the inability of intimate connection. The references to contemporary culture are juxtaposed with images of ancient Greece and the Ottoman period of Greece highlighting the historical aspects of masculinities (Connell 1995: 27-30). Papaioannou further includes elements from the Greek popular music culture (*bouzoukia*). As Koutsougera (2023) notes, the notion of the 'popular' (*laiko*) conveys a combination of working class and provincial elements and intersect urban and rural boundaries, while also evoking the Turkish colonized past and the Orient. This kind of popular music is usually performed in night venues where, as Koutsougera observes, traditional stereotypes of masculinities and femininities are privileged and performed while sexist, homophobic and heteronormative narratives circulate, reproducing existing social norms.

3.5.2. *Production-related strategies*

A main strategy in *2* includes the involvement of an all-male cast, namely, 22 performers that undertook an intensive workshop with Papaioannou lasting four months to come up with material relating to the male world.[6] The method of recalling personal experiences as main material for choreography derives from the tradition of Pina Bausch's dance-theater (Climenhaga 2009: 20-21) and provides substantial connections between the lived-embodied experience, the cultural context and the poetics of art. Here it is useful to draw reference to Pavis's (2016: 63) application of Butler's theory to the theater, in which traditional hierarchies are disrupted by shifting the locus of meaning from textual supremacy to the performer's physical presence. Within this framework, the performer's body is understood not as a passive medium, but as a fabricated construct meticulously shaped by training, socio-cultural conventions, and somatic techniques to function effectively within an ensemble. Rather than subordinating the performer to a pre-existing script, this reading demands that the discourse is contextualized within 'thinking bodies.' Through embodying structures of power and habitus development, performers accumulate a form of physical capital which is actively used into the choreographic process. Ultimately, all or part of this capital transfigures to art, when it becomes embedded in the final structure of the performance.

[6] https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/2

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Furthermore, placing only male bodies on stage enhances the main ideological point of the work, highlighting the various ways through which masculinity is collectively performed and regulated. The strategy of staging masculinity as performance unfolds around the main character, performed by the popular actor Aris Servetalis. Servetalis is a lone man constantly exposed to cultural norms, sometimes reluctantly performing what is expected and other times, observing bewildered or following passively what is suggested by the environment, thus exposing the tension between the cultural canon and the individual agency and also, the structured nature of social gender hence, shedding light on the fragility and disruptive character of dominant masculinity.

Finally, Papaioannou is strategically using the mainstream both as a platform of communication towards a wide audience and as the foundation for its own critique. A similar strategy had been developed a few years earlier in his work *One Moment of Silence* (1995), a homoerotic dance work that was expected to address a wide audience with funding from the Ministry of Culture and private sponsors (Tzintziloni 2013: 275). *2* was a work exclusively funded by the private sector, presented in the mainstream theater Pallas, located in the center of Athens. Papaioannou's fame after the 2004 Olympic Games drew a record number of people to the theater, expanding the audience way beyond the artistic circles. As one critic interestingly notes 'Papaioannou now inhabits an unusual place, where "queer" seems to have effortlessly shifted into the mainstream. Performances at the recently renovated art deco Pallas cinema have been sold out ever since the opening in November, where edgy Athenians rub shoulders with the bourgeois blue-rinse brigade.' The performance team included popular actors like Aris Servetalis who is the main performer here. In this context, *2* blends in and at the same time, deconstructs elements of popular culture within a multi-layered semiotic system, in a mainstream venue, addressing a wide audience. Ultimately, we could suggest that popular culture is used here as the absolute lever providing broadly recognizable signs to a wide audience through a popular platform, to dismantle dominant discourses of masculinity.

3.6. **Forms of life level – Performing masculinity in contemporary society**

In this level, all previous practices and strategies coalesce into a stable, recognizable worldview (Fontanille 2008). *2* interrogates the condition of male existence in contemporary, urban and globalized society exploring themes of gender, alienation, identity, desire, and mediated social realities. Papaioannou's dance-theater places hegemonic masculinity at the core of its multi-layered, multi-semiotic system to highlight its constructed, performative and fragile character and to open space for subordinate masculinities to emerge. Aligning with gender performance theory, the artwork mainly speaks of contemporary masculinity, suggesting its historical construction and breaking away from essentialist viewpoints that prioritize fixed origins or natural meanings.

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Moreover, *2* manages to expose the turbulence beneath the surface of hegemonic masculinity. The dance-work highlights how power structures inscribe onto/into the subjects' bodies and souls through various social environments since childhood. In this sense, one could draw again links to *One moment of silence*, where the exposure and stylization of the male body create a space for homoerotic desire and challenges fixed notions of identity (Tzintziloni 2013).

A powerful visual image that encompasses the question of the breaking-away potential can be seen in the scene of the fireworks explosion where the men are slowly approaching the night sky but slide back again, carried away against their efforts by the conveyor belt. Such imagery suggests the potential for active agency – going against the current – but also the near irresistible power of the current (in this case, the conveyor belt). In the last scene, we understand that finally the two men are getting close to one another when the one says "I'm outside your door" and the other one replies "push gently and you will come in." However, the visual elements contradict the aural background as the two bodies exist in spatial tension that keeps extending in different spatial levels. This image seems to reference Rene Magritte's *Golconda* (Thalassa 2018: 131), a surrealistic painting that depicts identically dressed men suspended in an urban sky. Patricia Allmer (2009) theorizes the bowler hat motif in Magritte's work as a powerful visual signifier of mass anonymity and the systematic erasure of individual identity in modern society.



Figure 7. Rene Magritte's *Golconda* and *2*'s final scene
Sources: Khalilova, N. (2015), Thalassa, C., 2018.

In *Golconda*, the repetition of identical, bowler-hatted men creates a claustrophobic vision of social conformity, transforming human beings into indistinguishable, floating units (Allmer 2009). Magritte's deployment of this figure that serves as a philosophical dismantling of the self, defines both aesthetically and thematically the final scene, encompassing *2*'s core negotiation of the relation between the individual and the society.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Developing body literacies in/through shared creation processes in contemporary dance

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BY: **Sonia Nikitin**

ABSTRACT

This article examines bodily practices in shared creation processes in contemporary dance that engage professional and non-professional dancers in collective meaning-making, developing literacies, and learning as social practice. Individual and collective improvisation practices are shown to be the foundation for developing body literacies, as part of pluriversal literacies (Perry 2021, 2024; Perry et al. 2023). Analysis of guided individual and collective improvised practices reveals that somatic experiences and widening of awareness act as foundations for intersubjective and intercorporeal negotiation of meaning. Attention to reoccurring forms of intercorporeal coordination, such as mirroring, leading and following, the apprehension of proximity and touch, and transposition of movement foster the capacity for continuous adjustment. Processes of shared creation function as a framework for the constitution of systems of intercorporeality, within which relationships between people and with the environment are co-constituted in resonance with dynamics of authority and expertise, and processes of learning intra- and intercorporeal communication. Shared literacies of the body enable an experimentation of forms of being-together that resist rigid hierarchies and communication based solely on word, speech and competitiveness, and become a foundation for collective organization.

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Introduction

Shared creation processes in contemporary dance (or community dance[1]) engaging professional and non-professional dancers are processes of collective meaning-making, of developing literacies, of learning as social practice. Building on this main thesis, I investigate how guided, improvised bodily exploration based on contemporary dance methods and somatic practices operates as individual and collective meaning-making practices. In interpersonal and interbodily experiences, the meaning of interaction and movement is itself always in flux. It exists within the intersubjectivity of the dancers and remains, to some extent, elusive – or rather, impossible to put into words by or for an outside observer, and even by or for the dancers themselves. I am therefore interested in the frameworks or situations of interaction, which I consider to be spaces for learning – of knowledge production and transmission – that enable the co-construction of meaning, rather than seeking a method for analyzing individual intentions of representing or expressing non-representative meaning.

My doctoral research and analysis presented in this article are based on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Coleman and Von Hellermann 2011) within shared creation projects in Lyon (France), Leipzig (Germany) and Vancouver (Canada). My methodology combines (participatory) observation, interviews and focus groups to varying extent in 8 groups and processes. The case studies are diverse, in terms of the timing of the projects, the institutional and territorial contexts in which they emerged, and the dancing bodies involved. As a researcher and trained contemporary dancer, I have engaged with these projects in different ways, particularly physically: some creative processes are followed from the inside from start to finish; others over an intensive but limited period; and still others involve moving back and forth between presence and absence, whilst altering my positions of observation. Through participatory observation in six out of seven projects, I was able to have bodily experiences, share and discuss them with the other dancers and to confront them with my understanding of contemporary dance. Through external observation in four processes, interviews with all leading artists and focus groups with dancers of five creation processes, I also focus on ways of guiding bodily experiences and narrating them, individually and collectively. By taking different positions in the observed projects – from participating dancer and part of the group, to external observer and

[1] The term community dance is used primarily in my field research in Vancouver. In France, I use the term 'création partagée' and in Germany the term 'kollektive Schaffensprozesse.' As a small part of participatory art, my interest is more directed towards the actual process of artistic creation, which is shared (to different extent) with non-professional dancers, but always in a long(er) temporality. I acknowledge the different concepts used to describe or define participatory approaches in art-making (e.g. socially engaged arts, co-creation), and situate my use as connected primarily to the 'extended interaction and shared labor [dimension of the projects] in which the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis' (Kester 2011:9). It is more so a description of a process itself, than a strong positioning of the implications of these processes in the art worlds.

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colleague of the leading artists – I identified similarities and differences throughout the processes in an inductive manner. These have been classified along different forms of knowledge: bodily, artistic and of being-together.

For this article, I draw on results from my observation and interviews with the Ageless Dancers group/project in Vancouver, as it exemplifies somatic or bodily approaches identified across the broader corpus. This project is analyzed through a combination of participatory and external observation, focus groups with the dancers, and interviews with the leading artist, thereby engaging all methodological tools.

Ageless Dancers is a weekly dance program, bringing together dancers between ages 50 and 86. The workshops or classes are led by a professional artist, changing every three years. Differently from the 'transactional way that a dance class [usually] operates' (Sarah Cavanaugh, Arts programmer at Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre Vancouver), these processes are based on individual and collective improvisation, as well as movement and choreographic exploration. At the end of the year, the group often presents a choreographic piece created out of the experiences of the year. Heather Myers, dancer and Manager of Outreach and Engagement at Ballet BC at the time, led this group during my field research in 2024.

I identified the following elements in the shared creation projects, that help understand how they can be considered as social spaces and processes for knowledge transmission and development and production of meaning[2]: (inter-)bodily practices based on improvisation which enable to make meaning from/of/through the body; bodily and discursive processes of sharing and negotiating meaning of movement, gestures and choreography. I argue that meaning is not only "located" in or produced through bodily practice, but also in sometimes rigid, sometimes flexible economies of meaning (Wenger 1997). They imply hierarchies of meaning and of meaning-making processes (literacies), and therefore, the (im)possibility to move towards understanding and possibly recognizing the value of other literacies (of the body, arts, being-together) in contemporary Western – productivist, individualistic, dualistic – societies.

To analyze the relational and impermanent nature of meaning produced in/through body/ies, I draw on phenomenology, socio-semiotics, and enactive approaches in a conceptual framework rooted in communication studies and dance studies. Wenger's (sociological) concept of communities of practice and economies of meaning (1997) helps to integrate these reflections into a wider social context, considering meaning-making processes as framed by hierarchies of meaning, constantly negotiated in social groups and society. The purpose of my research, and of this text as an examination of one part of it, is to contribute to filling the following research gap identified by De Luca (2017:36, our translation):

[2] Collective production of meaning and/or production of collective meaning

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0008 | **punctum.gr**

> Once the performative dimension of meaning-making is rethought as the point of convergence between, amongst other things, bodily engagement in action, the unfolding of a course of action as it is intersubjectively constructed, and the more or less temporary stabilisation of meaning within a social field, a theoretical framework capable of conceptualising the emergence and development of semiotic manifestations becomes necessary.

Mia Perry's understanding of (pluriversal) literacies (Perry 2021, 2024; Perry et al. 2023) provides a productive framework to consider the interrelation between experience, meaning, knowledge and power relations. Expanding literacies to include non-textual ones, she shows how recognizing other sign systems – and, I would add, practices to make meaning of those systems – is fundamental to face contemporary crisis, the ecological one especially for her.

1. Literacies in/through shared creation processes in contemporary dance

Mia Perry's conception of literacies goes far beyond the ability to read and write text, and even beyond the communicative process involving symbolic signs encoded within a language system. She acknowledges the importance of semiotic systems or sign systems in our relation to/with/in the world and emphasizes the differences in abilities to make meaning from the plural signs or sign systems we are responding/responsive to. This is what she calls literacies: 'we need to be able to "read" the sign systems, to make meaning from them in order for that aspect of life to impact our understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world. How we relate to things depends on the literacies we have' (Perry 2024:7-8).[3] This stance also allows attending to the active dimension of meaning-making: 'As literate beings, we are not simply consumers of sign systems; we are creating and representing, intervening, and expressing with sign systems too.' Agency can be held by sign, signifier and/or interpreter, but is clearly 'entangled in the process of sign systems'; therefore, she argues, 'the literacy that you practice [and I would even say literacies in plural] "does" something; it plays a role' (Perry 2024:65).

Based on these reflections, I propose to explore contemporary dance practices, based on improvisation and considerations of the body as multiple,[4] as processes of developing literacies. Dancers "read" – sense, experience and understand – the world differently

[3] SPerry states: 'Semiotics a[re] the fundamental process underpinning literacies practices' (Perry 2024:141) and 'How we relate to things is determined by semiotic systems, or sign systems. Our literacies determine our capacity to relate, to engage, to de-code, and then make sense of signs' (Perry et al. 2023:168).

[4] In community dance practices I observed, I discovered that transmitted techniques allow to experience multiple dimensions of the body, which I conceptualize as techniques of the lived, material and performative body.

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through bodily practices, produce and negotiate meaning intercorporeally and represent the impermanence and relationality of this meaning through abstract movement.

In my examination of contemporary dance in shared creation processes, dance is not considered to produce literacies analogous to textual forms,[5] since a gesture does not necessarily correspond to a word, and choreography cannot be read as a text. It is rather a practice that broadens the concept of meaning-making to include non-textual literacies, often overlooked in Western societies. To a certain extent, this also involves learning a system of signs. Contemporary dance emerged from the ever-increasing abstraction of the material representational form of things and thus allows for a multiplication of the meanings of gestures and movements in space: in terms of signifier, it *represents nothing*. Movement and choreography rather express emotional states or abstract ideas. This does not mean that there are no codes, imposed frameworks or bodily forms. Sometimes, contemporary dance as an aesthetic category is criticized for a tendency toward, or an ideal of, universalism, distance from practical contexts, elitism – especially through an over-abstraction or intellectualization of dance –, and the body as a virtuoso image. This also stems from a certain structure within the professional sphere, one increasingly dominated by universalist and productivist paradigms, that overlook diversity of meaning-making processes in contemporary dance as a practice.

My research shows how shared creation processes, although a niche within contemporary dance, resist in various ways the institutionalization and fixation of contemporary dance as a solely aesthetic entity – and thus pre-established codes of expression and interpretation. In this context, I challenge the notion of the choreographic piece as an object with a fixed meaning – in other words a totality of meaning – explicitly shared by all those involved in its production and public performances. Understanding what a particular choreographer intends to convey through their work, an aesthetic approach, is often the subject of study for dance researchers. My research instead shows that the meaning of the work, the movements, and the relationships between dancers transform, even in its (re)production and (re)presentation to an external audience, as does the meaning of the experiences. The social or interactive nature of shared creation processes is conveyed in bodily practices. My analysis focuses on the process through which dancers make meaning from intra- and inter-bodily signs in interactive and collective negotiations.

[5] I am building on and expanding upon the following ideas of De Luca: 'Si l'analogie entre danse et langage peut donc être partiellement gardée – dans la mesure où on peut soutenir que dans la danse sont à l'œuvre des relations entre expression et contenu –, l'analogie entre figures/programmes gestuels et faces du signe linguistique s'avère difficilement tenable. Dès lors, il est légitime de se demander: à quelles conditions la danse peut-elle se former comme un langage? Où se situerait la sémiose propre de la danse? [..] Une expression telle que «le langage de la danse» ne risque pas seulement de confirmer la thèse de l'impérialisme linguistique, selon laquelle toutes les ressources sémiotiques fonctionnent de la même manière que la langue (verbale). Le résultat en est également une occultation du caractère spécifique de différentes ressources sémiotiques et de mode de signification (Sonesson, 2009, p. c 2)' (De Luca 2017: 32 and 34).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12**:01:2026
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2. Intracorporeal communication through somatic practices as foundation of relational conceptions of the body

Practices of shared creation practices almost always start with somatic warm-ups. In the Ageless Dancers weekly workshops or classes, Heather Myers relies strongly on those somatic practices, in the beginning or sometimes even in the middle of a workshop. For example, in the 28/02/24 workshop, after a writing exercise, Heather suggests that people spread out around the room and find a 'place to settle' to 'take some time for yourself and your arrival physically,' because 'you just contemplated something mentally.' She mentions the option of using a mat or a chair to find a comfortable position. In order to 'tune into your internal landscape,' she invites dancers to close their eyes or 'soften the visual sense, [to] lower gaze,' then to begin to 'connect and yielding into gravity' and to 'notice how your breath feels [..] in your whole body,' to feel the inhalation and exhalation and the weight of the body on the floor. In this process, she suggests letting go of the body's weight (mentioning, for example, the feet, the pelvis, the head) and 'letting the idea of softening inform your movement.' As most dancers start swaying from side to side, slowly lifting and lowering their arms, Heather picks up on that and suggests 'maybe a quality of swaying,' then 'beginning to move side to side.' The swaying can then become more expansive, 'exaggerating the movements of ripple,' then 'beginning to stretch out.' She reminds dancers to be aware of 'gravity,' always 'exploring the weight of the body' in relation or tension to a 'sense of growth or expansion.' She invites them to 'dance your way to sitting or standing.' She stresses the importance of 'follow[ing] what your body is guiding you to do.' She then proposes some intentions of movement (reaching arms up, enlightening the awareness to directions they can send their arms to, folding and unfolding knees and elbows, as well as the spine), leaving the response really open to the dancers: 'whatever that means to you.' She suggests transforming this into 'undulations of the spine,' which 'starts at the tailbone and goes all the way up to your skull.' She proposes to explore the 'circulation of feet draw[ing] shapes on the floor, as if it were a paintbrush.' She suggests shifting the focus to the hands and wrists, being 'imaginative' about the different ways of bending and turning them. She then proposes to 'bring resistance into your movement' and then 'introduce pulse or rebound [and] connect to the energy of the music.' The explorations begin within a fixed area, so she invites dancers to start 'travel[ling] in the space by tak[ing] up space.' Finally, she suggests slowing the movement down little by little. This slowing down allows one to 'get back into the sensation of movement.' She then suggests settling into a posture that feels 'resourceful,' for example with one hand on the chest and the other on the stomach.

In another workshop (17/04/24), she offers to 'take in the room visually; see things you don't always see; take perspectives you don't always have.' She then proposes to

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'respond to what you see, feel, hear' [through movement], to 'get a little more creatively engaged, beginning to explore the space more physically and interpretatively.' To go even further, she invites dancers to notice what exists and happens 'beyond the room and invite that into your dialogue,' even opening the door, 'or anybody who would like to explore out here.'

The above excerpts from my field notes illustrate how ways to attend to one's own material body in relation to the space and material environment are explored in a non-prescriptive manner. The artist offers perceptual frameworks, focuses on specific signs and openings to non-representational movement. Movements are serving a raised awareness on different sensations. These practices of somatic warm-up often become a routine, and are then also explored in more concrete frameworks – or scores – individually, but also collectively.

Analyzing a wide range of such practices or techniques used in shared creation processes reveals that they bring immediate subjective bodily experience to the foreground and foster an attentiveness and openness to intracorporeal communication processes (Martin-Juchat 2020). Guiding artists convey ways of perceiving and physically interpreting a variety of signs that are not usually accessible or central to amateur dance practice. The importance of those practices, which enable dancers to develop an awareness of various sensations in their own bodies, is also brought out in the focus groups conducted with participants in the process. For theorists of somaesthetics, these practices lead to a vision or understanding of the self as situated, relational and transactional, rather than autonomous (Shusterman 2007:20). When bodily techniques are approached from a perspective of autonomy and valuing subjective experiences of the lived body, the practice leads to understanding the body in its multiplicity, as a totality or a whole. This aligns, through practice, with conceptions of the body that are otherwise theorized in complex ways, for example through semiotics:

> Yet, even if viable from a functional point of view, a body conceived of and treated [..] as if it were merely an aggregate of organs cannot appear to us – who, from another perspective, "inhabit" that very body – as anything other than irreparably mutilated, as deprived of something absolutely essential – "soul"? "breath of life"? "self-awareness"? presence to oneself? – which, whatever terminology one adopts, makes our own body, for each of us, an irreducible whole, immediately felt as imbued with meaning. (Landowski 2004:78–79, our translation)

According to Landowski (2004), the body cannot be understood (solely) as a surface upon which signs are inscribed to communicate content, for experience itself is already a process of meaning-making. The body is therefore a 'discursive instance,'

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12**:01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0008 | **punctum.gr**

generating meaning whose effects can arise and be experienced only in the present moment. The intelligible can no longer be separated from the sensible, for lived experience is bodily and laden with meaning.

Whilst techniques relating to the individual subjective experience of the lived body are central in shared creation processes, they are interwoven within a collective process. They above all also concern the relationality inherent in the multiplicity and even what I call the porosity of the body: there is not a back-and-forth between a body that perceives, records, interprets, and then produces signs, in a rather simplistic approach to communication, but 'meaning as the product of lived intersomatic relations' (Landowski 2004:78, our translation). Somatic experiences and widening of awareness act as foundations for intersubjective and intercorporeal negotiation of meaning.

3. Intercorporeal coordination routines to develop shared signs

Various forms of inter-bodily coordination are explored and developed in the observed processes, which engage the dancers' communicative possibilities in diverse ways. The perception, interpretation and reaction to bodily and environmental signs (the shape of anatomical parts and the material body as a whole, sensations of distance or proximity, the spatialization of the body, intentions of the addressee, the temporality of the interaction, interpersonal relationships and social contexts) are inextricably linked within a flow of movement. Attention to the different forms of coordination and means of communication - including tactile, olfactory and auditory communication beyond the visual communication - in separate explorations allows 'individuals to become aware that their body is not simply a medium for the expression of signs, but is also engaged in the interpretation of signs' (Martin-Juchat 2020: 34, our translation) and to alter their representations of the body.

For Martin-Juchat, non-verbal communication is fundamental to living beings, particularly mammals. It involves the living body and (partially) dissociates it from the standardized body In the observed practices, non-verbal communication does not rely solely on the use of signs based on cultural or aesthetic conventions; I propose that these practices should be analyzed from the perspective of a dialogue between the standardized and living body, from a perspective that does not set the immediately perceived sensations and the 'consciously calculated' movements, gestures and postures in such direct opposition to one another.

My research has revealed a certain consistency in the pedagogical methods or frameworks used in the processes of expressing and interpreting bodily signs, across different observed projects. Although the movements and gestures themselves are not entirely codified, since they are based on improvisation, the forms or possibilities

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for action and reaction between two bodies engaged in these practices are routinized. Reoccurring practices across the projects are mirroring, leading and following, the apprehension of proximity, then of touch, and the transposition and interpretation of movement.

Mirroring is based on the instantaneous replication of the other person's movement in a face-to-face arrangement, i.e., as if in a mirror. In these explorations, it is impossible to anticipate one's own movement or that of the other in advance; the ability to perceive, interpret and act in the moment is developed. Always observed in an improvisational context, these practices can vary in complexity (static, in motion, using the hands or the whole body, etc.).

A key aspect of mirroring, "leading and following," is also explored more explicitly in certain exercises. The aim of mirroring is ultimately to reach a point where it is no longer possible to determine who is proposing and guiding the movement and to be in a state of give-and-take or co-construction. In contrast, the aim of leading and following is to make each person's roles explicit, so that they can be clearly identified and modified. One person proposes a movement, which the other follow(s) almost simultaneously. These two elements are based on learning by imitation, which is often fundamental in dance classes to incorporate different movement habits or bodily states, but without establishing a single reference point: that of the artist. Mirroring, leading and following, instead, rely on the ability to experiment with the physical proposals of each member of the group through interaction.

The relationship between bodies during interaction as well as the awareness of this relationship is particularly experienced, through the physical or spatial distance between bodies. Interactions involving physical contact contribute to the creation of meaning on various levels: in the refinement of attention to one's own body and in the apprehension of, or interaction with, the other. Exercises, always based on improvisation, are proposed by the artists to reinforce certain sensations and explore the body's reactions to physical interactions and contact with others. This then involves a confrontation between the physicality of one's own body and the materiality of the 'positive' space, yet another way of perceiving the signs of the environment and the body, and of experiencing the physical envelope as a boundary and/or liminal space. The experience of the liminal space between "self" and "other" constitutes, on the one hand, the differentiation of body-subjects, but also allows one to think and feel the complementarity of materialities in the production of movement and meaning: how another body and its weight modifies, supports, leans on, accompanies or resists a bodily impulse. Touch within shared creation processes depends on the artist's proposals and group dynamics, as well as the social and cultural context.

Beyond practices that create movement through mimicry or dependence, the reference to and alteration of another's movements – sometimes referred to as the trans-

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0008 | **punctum.gr**

position of movement – are very significant in the processes observed. Heather Myers often proposes explorations around what she calls 'iteration of movement,' in complex movement structures but also in very simple frameworks. On the 28/02/2024 workshop, she invites all dancers into a circle for a "check-in": each dancer should propose one movement and/or word to share how 'you feel physically, mentally, emotionally.' Others should respond to that in movement – adapting, transposing to another body part, freely interpreting – instead of 'copying/mirroring.'

In the observed practices, improvisational games or exercises allows dancers to explore and learn plural modes of intercorporeal coordination. These social interactions 'constitu[te] an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved' (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 493). These games or exercises are partly structured and defined by the artist's pedagogical approach, even though the interaction and the meaning produced differs with each exploration. Nevertheless, I consider those as routinized and learned forms of coordination that enable the development of different ways of making sense jointly (and then collectively articulated) by acknowledging oneself and the other as sentient bodies acting as co-enunciators. They also constitute a shared experience of interacting as dancers and as a group, and, therefore, common knowledge on how to make meaning from other bodies in space.

The observed routines of interaction overlap with the forms of coordination analyzed by enactivists De Jaegher and Di Paolo – mirroring, anticipation, imitation and synchronization (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 491) – who also stress the relational dimension of intercorporeal interactions (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 494). In their approach, intersubjectivity is grounded in embodiment as dynamic actions integrated throughout the entire body. In this sense, intentions are expressed through the body (in the expression of bodily signs) and through action; they can be perceived by others and are generated or transformed within this process of interaction (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009: 469).

Here, bodies are engaged in 'a reciprocal relationship between immediately perceptible presences, thereby opening up the possibility of meaning in which intelligibility will be mediated as much by intersomaticity as by intersubjectivity' (Landowski 2004: 91, our translation). For Landowski, the body's power to signify lies in part in a form of unmediated contagion, provided that room for play is allowed within regulated exercises. The various systems of coordination transmitted in processes of shared creation foster the capacity for continuous adjustment, specifically because they are experienced through improvisation. They are thus experienced without any prior imposition or fixation of the bodily form to be executed; the form emerges from and through interaction with the other.

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4. Routines and evolutivity of meaning-making

De Jaegher and Di Paolo analyze social interaction through the concept of coordination, in order to understand it as a continuous or ongoing process:

> We must go beyond a view that defines interaction as simply the spatio-temporal coincidence of two agents who influence each other. We must move toward an understanding of how their history of coordination defines the interaction as an identifiable pattern with its own internal structure, and its own role to play in the process of understanding each other and the world. (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 492)

I propose to consider that literacies of the body are coupled to literacies of being-together: ways of organizing interactions in dance, and collectively in a broader sense. Shared literacies of the body enable an experimentation of forms of being-together that resist rigid hierarchies, communication based solely on word and speech and competitiveness. The shared signs and semiotic systems developed through routines of coordination become a foundation for collective organization.

In the 08/05/24 workshop, Heather Myers explores improvisations involving 'neutral travel': walking through the space with clear stops and changes of direction, generally parallel to the studio walls, without any added dance movements (what a dancer calls 'ornaments'). This exercise, repeated several times in different workshops and later integrated into the final piece, is based on group awareness ('awareness of each other') and clear decision-making regarding stops and changes of direction. I can clearly identify those who have already practiced this exercise: looking ahead with the head following or initiating the change of direction, trajectories with a clear end and stop, compositions with other bodies through shared stops and starts, formation of duos or groups during stops, or variations in orientation or the spaces between bodies. Quickly, these models spread throughout the group, through repetitive bodily practice and the artist's verbal feedback: she demonstrates and reiterates, for example, on several occasions what kinds of creative decisions are possible and emphasizes attention to the spatial constellations of bodies that are developing or are being developed: 'as you travel, allow yourself to see the group; notice constellations or patterns'; 'where are we in space and how we move with others in space?'

Kinesthetic communication (Quinten 2016:40) is a form of nonverbal communication based on processes of empathy or resonance and involving the entire body. It is not only lived, experienced, and structured in the immediate action, but also involves forms of expression and interaction shaped by individual and collective experiences, particularly between the people involved in the interaction – what Meyer et al. (2017:10) call 'dyadic body memory.' We can observe the 'history' of the intercorporeal

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0008 | **punctum.gr**

and intersubjective relationships within groups of dancers engaged in regular practice. Models of coordination between bodies are part of a set of codes governing the (qualities of) movements or bodily states that are socially and culturally defined. The body, as a semiotic medium, constitutes a phenomenal reality that is meaningful in itself and, at the same time, is embedded within a regulated order of the group and the world (Chave-Dartoen 2024:107). The continuous interpretation of our being and our environment cannot exist outside a network of symbols or signs that constitute our (anthropological) culture (McNamara in Fraleigh 1999:164) and that also constitute an international professional artistic culture.

Intercorporeality can therefore be conceived 'as an overarching system which over time gains its own pattern, autonomous dynamics, and peculiar history' (Meyer et al. 2017:16). Processes of shared creation function as a framework for the constitution of these systems of intercorporeality, within which relationships between people and with the environment are co-constituted in resonance with dynamics of authority and expertise, frameworks of being-together, the possibility of acting upon these frameworks, and processes of learning intra- and intercorporeal communication. These are joint processes of meaning-making, which, according to De Jaegher and Di Paolo, are created and transformed by patterns of coordination and disruption, and by the stabilization of models of joint activity: 'When such patterns lawfully stabilize some invariant relation the perceptual result is jointly constructed, and novel meanings may be established in interaction' (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007:500).

5. Experiencing and knowing other ways of meaning-making

The interconnectedness of bodies in space is also highlighted and brought to life through imagination directly in an Ageless Dancers workshop: Heather asks participants to open their eyes, observe their surroundings as they move, and then imagine that everyone is connected by a web: 'Everyone is affected by the movements of others.' She then suggests detaching from this web and observing if and how this feels different. From this awareness of the individual in relation to the collective, interactions in motion can develop, always in interrelation and co-construction with the affordances of the space. In dance, the ability to be open to the co-emergence of movement and meaning is often referred to as *listening* (Brandstetter 2013:164-165).

The inter-kinesthetic field comprises processes of intercorporeal resonance, inter-affectivity and kinesthetic expectations (Greco 2018:172). Within this field various forms of knowledge develop and take shape: complex skills based on the bodily understanding of others' attitudes, actions and behaviors, transformed into patterns and dispositions (Faure 2000:92), and kinesthetic empathy as a 'mode of knowledge.'

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This knowledge makes it possible to diversify the possibilities of sensations, perceptions, reflections and actions, and to co-create meaning or to experience other regimes of meaning: 'the lived experience, insofar as it makes sense, is not a given [because] it is constructed through interaction, through a (often reciprocal) testing of the subject by the immanent sensory qualities of the other' (Landowski 2004:8, our translation). I therefore hypothesize that the above-mentioned bodily practices bring us closer to what Landowski calls the second, 'union,' strategy or regime of meaning-making:

> We can also imagine, at the very opposite end of the spectrum – at least in certain contexts and far removed from any form of instrumentalization – ways in which our dispositions, curiosities, or personal projects might align with those of the entity facing us, which may express itself autonomously. From such adjustments, another status of meaning becomes apparent: that of a meaning which would no longer, by definition, be entirely and unilaterally fixed in advance according to the sole criteria of relevance used by the reference subject, but whose emergence would become inseparable from the reciprocal construction of the two partners in relation. [..] Take dancing, for example: if, while dancing, I want to interact with another person in a way that truly makes sense within my own body, it will not be enough for me to expect the other person to correctly follow the codified 'steps' of the dance we are performing. If that were the case, at best I would only manage to join with a sort of 'dancing object' capable of executing – perhaps perfectly, but mechanically – a predefined generic program, such as that of 'the waltz': in other words, I would in that case be dancing more with an automaton or a sort of robot than with the living body of a partner who is a subject. On the other hand, if I aspire to something more rewarding than that – to a sensitive relationship that creates meaning and value – I must first ensure that my partner, like me, can give their own body complete freedom to express itself as it pleases - for which I must, at the very least, regard and treat them, on the gestural and somatic level, as a true co-enunciator (Landowski 2004:27-28, our translation).

The possibility of experiencing and developing such relationality is based on an attention to the body from a non-dualist perspective.
ribed below (Section 2.1).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Conclusion

Enactive approaches help us understand that individuals are always immersed in a network of interactions linked to biological and cultural histories, both individual and collective. In this sense, the world – or worlds – is always co-created through the coexistence and intercorporeality of beings. The perspective of interactional social understanding and socio-semiotics contrasts with representationalist approaches, according to which the social world and the other are pre-constructed, independent of intersubjective interactions and circulations. In relational ontologies nothing preexists the relationships that constitute the individual, and every person – inevitably exist as knots or relies in networks – nay, weaves of relations' (Escobar 2018:200).

In this article, I argue that participation in shared creation processes in contemporary dance can be a way to make meaning of bodies, spaces, worlds, in forms of resistance to dominant ways of meaning-making or literacies in Western societies. They clearly enable the development of literacies of the body.[6] Developing those body literacies can lead to physically experiencing the relationality and impermanence of meaning-making of the world, or rather worlds. Interpersonal explorations reveal the multiplicity of the body, the meaning of movement, and the other within an environment whose affordances and possible interpretations are equally manifold. This is a process of learning and developing knowledge that allows us to grasp the other in their entirety – in their sensory, living, and moving dimension – rather than merely as a projection surface to be deciphered (as in reductive semiological approaches). The inherently collective and relational dimension of the techniques is even more evident; meaning-making through/with/on the body is not only an individual process. Literacies of the body and literacies of being-together, when being analyzed in articulation, are a productive contribution to the semiotics of dance: they enable to observe and to study learning and meaning-making through/with/on the body as social practices.

Specific contexts, situations and interactions in my field research also show that bodily practices and literacies are inscribed in economies of meaning (Wenger 1997): meaning-making occurs inside of frames, needing competence to participate to negotiation of meaning and develop ownership of meaning. Meaning is also negotiated through individual and collective verbal discussions, as well as implicit or explicit norms that weight on shared creation projects (such as artistic norms, economic and social value of choreographic pieces, rigid and durable separations between artist and amateur or expert and novice). When we consider these processes through the lens of Wenger's

[6] Mentioned observations relate to what Mia Perry calls 'a curriculum framework for body literacy [in which] learning objectives might revolve around identifying and making meaning from the signs animate in one's own body. These are also connected and intra-acting with the semiotic systems animating other bodies and materials. The learning objectives then could focus on both self-awareness and relationality with other bodies and materials.' (Perry 2024: 150-151)

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communities of practice and Landowski's regimes of meaning and view them as fostering various literacies, the negotiation of meaning in the production of knowledge reveals itself as a relational and ongoing phenomenon: the meaning of movements is always (re) created in the interaction of sensing-thinking bodies, in reference to a norm of the dancing body established historically and contextually within the group embedded in a local and international 'tradition' of interpreting movements in contemporary dance.

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Sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation

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BY: **Alessandra Randazzo**

ABSTRACT

This article aims to address one of the gaps frequently identified in semiotics, namely the study of dance, and more specifically of forms of dance improvisation that remain open-ended, in contrast to the highly structured improvisation found, for instance, in Argentine tango. As such, these practices contribute to a reexamination of collective composition in contemporary dance, insofar as choreographers frequently use improvisation as both choreographic material and a compositional tool. From this perspective, I argue for an important distinction between sense-making and meaning-making – a distinction that is rarely made in studies of improvisation – by highlighting the different phases that unfold before, during, and after dance improvisation. I then examine what is typically valued in improvisation, namely sense-making, by analyzing its nature (open-ended, polyphonic, self-referential, autopoietic) as well as the processes through which it emerges (cognitive and intuitive skills; feedback loops). This ultimately enables me to bring to light a cyclical, rather than linear, temporal process, thus offering a renewed perspective on what may be called semiosis.

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1. Points of introduction

1.1. Contemporary perspectives in semiotics: body movements and dance

In semiotics, semiosis refers to the process by which signs produce meaning. Semiotics was initially conceived as a linguistic and lexical approach (Saussure 1983), progressively applied to the analysis of the text (Hjelmslev 1961). When applied to body movements, such as in dance, semiotics shifts from the textual domain to the experiential domain (Landowski 2013),

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thereby giving rise to a whole new set of questions. This shift indeed raises the problem of how to objectify this new object of inquiry and, consequently, the question of its scientific validity. Body movement is difficult to distance from lived experience and transform into a scientific 'object.' It also raises the issue of the segmentation, fixation, and codification of signs, as exemplified by a well-established language. By contrast, body movements are ephemeral and involve the active production of sense by agents, often through their interaction with the surrounding environment. Finally, this shift raises the question of how to develop an appropriate discourse on this new object. As lived experiences, body movements resist easy translation into linguistic structures like words, sentences, or texts. Rather, they appear to involve another mode of communication, whether implicit or non-verbal. Applying semiotics to body movement therefore profoundly reshapes several of its fundamental assumptions.

Moreover, when body movements are no longer confined to everyday human activities (Greimas 1983) but become part of dance, a further difficulty emerges. Dance is never simply a sequence of physical movements; it always involves a system of references that can prompt audience interpretation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty draws a distinction between primary actions with a literal meaning (for example, biological actions that ensure our survival) and actions shaped through learned motor habits, which convey a figurative meaning, as in dance (1962). To take a well-known example, in Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* (1978), one of her most iconic works, she stages everyday gestures in a café crowded with chairs: dancers wander aimlessly, crossing the space from end to end. These movements acquire a figurative dimension and may evoke the anxiety of being lost in a fast-paced world where individuals drift (Lebon 2025).

Consequently, body movements drawn from everyday life are poeticized in contemporary dance. For example, a choreographer may work on the amplitude or minimalism of a movement. They could also ask their dancers to embody elements without imitating them, by working with bodily states. Catherine Kintzler terms this phenomenon 'deconditioning' a gesture (detaching it from its ordinary context) and 'reconditioning' it (recontextualizing it by creating a new world and opening a new space) (2006). From this defamiliarization – and consequent opacification – of everyday movement an interpretive opening thus emerges in contemporary dance.

In contemporary dance, the semiosis of dancing would therefore be linked to a 'utopian body,' to use an expression coined by Michel Foucault. It is a body that does not need masks, tattoos, or makeup to be torn away from its own space and projected into another; it is a body that, through its expressive power, combined with lighting and sonic effects, succeeds in creating a new space. It is a 'penetrable and opaque body, open and closed body, utopian body' (Foucault 2006: 231) This production of meaning is, more precisely, not tied to a codified vocabulary of dance, as in classical ballet for instance, but rather emerges from the internal and singular language of bodies, from

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what Laurence Louppe (2010) calls a 'poetics of the body.' Inspired by François Delsarte, who in his oral teachings spoke of a "semiotics" of the body to describe the idea that the body possesses its own language (Stebbins, 1886), she turns this insight into one of the foundational aspects of contemporary dance: the symbolization of the body, outside any established framework.

In summary, these considerations make explicit why semiotics 'has devoted relatively little attention to case studies focusing on dance or, more broadly, on diverse bodily practices' (de Luca 2016: 13, our translation). Dance continues to represent 'a kind of black hole for semiotics,' or 'the blind spot of semiotics' (ibid.: 138, our translation).

1.2. **Improvisation as a further challenge for semiotics**

Dance theorists and historians agree that improvisation is crucial for understanding the emergence of contemporary dance and an indispensable component of it. The advent of postmodern dance in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s – characterized by the unprecedented practice of improvisation as an end in itself (Carter 2000) – paved the way for the development of contemporary dance in the latter half of the twentieth century (Banes 1987). In doing so, it rejects technical virtuosity, reclaims bodily sensations, revalues the quotidian, and cultivates an ability to negotiate with the unpredictable. In this respect, it serves equally in the creation of choreographic material and choreographic tools (Louppe 2010). Hence, the exploration of instability and disequilibrium, the cultivation of embodied attention, and the disarticulation of body movement constitute, for instance, techniques developed within improvisation workshops that can be mobilized in choreographic composition.

However, beyond the challenges inherent in body movement and dance, improvisation introduces additional complexities for semiotic analysis. Greimas indeed emphasizes that 'in order for an analysis of the arts in movement to be carried out, they must first be immobilized and stabilized; hence the necessity of a writing of dance or a poetics of dance, which constitutes the necessary condition for the study of dance itself' (1986: 42, our translation). This stabilization of movement may also occur through what he terms 'gestural programs' or closed 'cultural projects,' (1968) which, in dance, essentially concern the planning of a choreography. These prerequisites for a semiotic analysis of dance consequently exclude more ephemeral and open-ended forms such as improvisation, which is grounded in neither notation nor choreographic planning. This is why, if dance already constitutes a 'disciplinary and object-related challenge' (De Luca 2016: 138, our translation) for semiotic analysis, the challenge is even greater in the case of dance improvisation.

In recent years, some scholars have proposed a semiotic analysis of improvisational forms in dance, particularly regarding Argentine tango (De Luca 2016; Kimmel 2019). This form of social dance indeed fosters improvised bodily interactions that, to a certain

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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extent, reshape the frameworks and norms that structure the practice. Yet, on the other hand, it constitutes a highly structured form of improvisation: Argentine tango is based on a codified vocabulary of steps and postures, with clearly identifiable styles, as well as on the diachronic sedimentation of the practice, which provides a shared memory repository from which dancers can draw. This process has contributed to the recognition of this dance as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2009 (De Luca 2016). In other words, if improvisation in tango can be understood as a form of 'joint improvisation,' the creativity at stake is essentially combinatoric: 'Improvisation lies in the couple's ability to combine elements in variable ways and occasionally discover new systemically permissible elements' (Kimmel 2019: 564). Moreover, there is 'a clear role distinction' between the leader and the follower, which limits the follower's creative contributions to accentuation and ornamentation (ibid.). Consequently, 'although dancers progressively enlarge their personal repertoire, essential creativity concerning never-tried-before elements is less frequent, especially spontaneously "invented" forms' (ibid.: 565).

It is precisely this type of improvisation, which is less constrained and more spontaneous, that I seek to examine in this article: namely, forms of improvisation that do not rely on a predefined style, grammar, or lexicon, such as Contact Improvisation (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). These elements further challenge the tendency to associate semiosis with linguistics and body movements with language; it therefore makes it even more necessary to rethink sense-making and meaning-making through dance improvisation.

1.3. **Main questions and method**

What constitutes both the specificity and the difficulty of less-structured improvisation in dance is that, in its non-verbal communication in real time, it 'makes use of non-lexicalized body movements' (Nelson et al. 2024: 2). In effect, 'it invites a pre-symbolic form of semiosis where multiple voices or narratives can co-exist,' (ibid.) depending on the proposals offered by partners and the turns taken by the situation as it is being co-constructed. Given the difficulty of this task – namely, tuning, embodying together, and making sense collectively in the present moment – it therefore becomes relevant to ask how this collective sense is specifically generated in improvisation and what its nature is. These are the two main questions that will be addressed in this article: the 'what' and the 'how' of sense-making in free and loosely structured dance improvisation practices. In this context, I will also take the opportunity to further examine the distinction between sense-making and meaning-making in dance, using improvisation as a primary case study.

To this end, I will explore these questions through a first-person phenomenological approach, illustrating and developing my argument with examples drawn from my improvisation experiences in workshops and performances. My belief is that 'to

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know what dance is or feels like, one must ask dancers what they experience or experience dance oneself' (Warbuton 2011: 68). It is both a way of revaluing situated, embodied, and experiential forms of knowledge, grounded in trust in sensory experience, and also, a way of adopting an enactive approach to better understand how a "thought in action" is created in improvisation, thereby producing sense, and even meaning. I borrow the expression 'dance enaction' from Edward C. Warburton, who proposes 'to understand how experiences of dance emerge from more basic processes, and how dancing shapes the mind, body, and brain' (ibid.: 67). Here, I apply it to the case of dance improvisation, focusing on interaction with the environment and others. This method relies on the collection of experiential data and on reflections derived from notes taken in dance notebooks during practice sessions. It therefore differs from a micro-genetic approach, which analyses dance sequences second by second through video recordings, freeze-frames, and photographs, although I acknowledge the value of such an approach (Kimmel and Hristova 2021).

2. The facilitation, observation and testimony of body language in dance improvisation

2.1. Sense-making and meaning-making

It is common in theories of language to distinguish between codified meaning and the emergence of sense through a lived and sensory experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, distinguishes between spoken speech (*parole parlée*), or institutionalized speech, and speaking speech (*parole parlante*), or creative speech, through which the perceived world is transformed into explicit sense – a process that is especially characteristic of artistic expression (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964, 1973). This distinction is not confined to philosophy; it also appears in semiotic theory. For example, when Landowski calls for a 'semiotics to be reinvented,' he distinguishes between 'a regime of meaning' and 'another regime of sense' (2013: 21, our translation). In the former, 'the world is approached as a network of signs to be deciphered' (ibid.: 25, our translation), as if it were a text or a narrative. In the latter, sense is not something to be decoded, yet the world is nonetheless imbued with sense. The first thus corresponds to a regime of "reading" the world, in which meanings are already constituted, whereas the second corresponds to a regime of "grasping" the lifeworld, in which the process remains indefinitely open and gives rise to the emergence of sense. Landowski characterizes this second regime as a sense arising in situation, through our interaction with the world, and grounded in an existential mode of being-in-the-world.

This second regime is more representative of what occurs in situations of (dance) improvisation. As a matter of fact, in an improvisational situation, practitioners seek to structure the unknown and the unpredictable, to give form to what is formless, and to

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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render intelligible what is taking place. To do so, improvisers connect elements to one another and may construct a mental map of the situation. As Kent De Spain asserts, 'if improvisation can be seen as a process of mapping the unknown, tracking is the practice of drawing and occasionally glancing at the map' (2014: 52). This process thus accounts for the emergence of sense that is not pre-constituted but rather comes into being through interaction with the environment: sense does not depend on any single agent. This is what is commonly referred to as "sense-making." The term was first introduced in theories of enaction (e.g. Maturana and Varela 1980) to emphasize the autopoiesis of a living organism as it generates its own environment. It was subsequently taken up, for example, in semiotics by Paolucci (e.g. 2021), who uses it to describe a multiplicity of enunciating instances that collectively produce a semiotic environment which, in turn, through a process of downward causation, produces these instances. This semiotic environment is not merely a system of sense; it is also a system of values, encompassing norms, habits, and other forms of social regularity.

On the other hand, "meaning-making" in dance rather refers to a process through which an element is integrated into a system of values and into already established reference points. For example, Warburton (2011) discusses 'dance marking.' It is a tool that allows dancers to remember choreography more easily: rather than dancing full out, they create "marks," thereby establishing their own vocabulary of reduced movements that stand for fully formed movements. For instance, a finger gesture can be used to represent a turn without executing a full-body rotation. Here we have an example of "meaning-making": something that makes sense for the dancer individually and that is integrated into an already clearly identified frame of reference, the choreographic piece; it is not a tool for clarifying and constructing a situation, as in improvisation.

Although it is clear that, in the course of a (successful) improvisation, a process of "sense-making" emerges among the participants, it is nevertheless useful to distinguish different levels of "sense-making" and "meaning-making," depending on whether one considers what takes place before, during, or after the improvisation.

2.2. **Meaning conveyed by prompts**

Contrary to common belief, improvising does not mean doing just anything or whatever you want. As noted by the pedagogue, dancer, and choreographer David Zambrano:

> what happens is that many times when I go to teach improvisation, for many people, young people especially, it's like they can do whatever. But you can say: 'Where are we going?' and they answer: 'I don't care, whatever,' and they stay here. And then I say, 'okay, it's two of us, where are we going?', and they answer back 'I don't care, every place.' In that case, there is not really a place that we can go... (Randazzo and Zambrano 2023: 6)

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Thus, when some do whatever they please in improvisation, they paradoxically risk doing nothing at all – failing to engage the imagination or creativity and remaining within familiar patterns; in short, they risk boredom. This situation may also result in aimless actions that create confusion and disorder, by associating the unpredictable with the senseless. Given these risks, it is clear why there is a need to establish a framework to stimulate and guide improvisers' actions, and to avoid both inaction and indiscriminate movement. Such frameworks are especially designed to disrupt embodied habits and stimulate participants' corporeal exploration.

Most often, they are based on verbal prompts used by the workshop facilitator to provide instructions to the dancers and spark their movements. These instructions are never commands, but always proposals; this is why the facilitator is called thus and not a dance master, and this is why these frameworks are not especially structured but remain open. They support the dancers in their explorations without directing them. In this regard, these instructions never specify exactly what to do: they set a framework, often unusual or unfamiliar, that delimits the action to take place, without indicating how the action should be performed.

These verbal prompts can elicit biomechanical constraints, for instance when practitioners are instructed to 'move while lying on the floor, without moving either the legs or the arms' (a task inspired by the work of Anna Halprin). They can also evoke widely shared images, as in comparisons such as 'moving like a snake' or metaphors such as 'becoming a snake.' Furthermore, they may draw on analogical imagery, for example: 'moving on the floor like water flowing out of a bottle,' whereby the properties of water are transferred to the moving body in order to explore and cultivate different bodily states. Although these verbal prompts are phrased differently, they invite practitioners to explore the same aspect of movement within the body. When used within the same improvisation session, they can help illuminate how language, through its different formulations, may differentially shape bodies in movement.[1] In all cases, verbal prompts convey meaning to participants. Whether grounded in linguistic structures, the body's physical anatomy, or the shared cultural imagination, they draw upon common frames of reference shared by the facilitator and the movers.

These aspects point to a new mode of dance transmission emerging from the twentieth century onwards. It is no longer a scopic model of transmission, based on vision and the imitation of movements, steps, and postures. It is now a pedagogy of movement that has become essentially oratory, seeking the effectiveness of speech on gestures through a crafted verbal language. Some pedagogues speak without moving, while others guide through speech and engage themselves in the play of their own

[1] An experience during which I facilitated two workshops as part of the training program led by Camille Zimmermann for the University Diploma ProPhilia: 'What movements for learning?' (*'Quels mouvements pour apprendre?'*) (May 15-16 and May 22-23, 2025, Université Côte d'Azur).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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propositions. It gives room for verbal-gestural triggers. For example, in an exercise inspired by Contact Improvisation, a facilitator improvising in a duet with a participant may intentionally give weight through their head while simultaneously verbalizing this action. This can facilitate the participant's awareness of this quality, providing perceptual information that they can then engage with and integrate into the unfolding movement-based interaction. At times, verbal prompts may also be supported by other media, such as paintings. For example, during a workshop held at L'Entre-Pont in Nice on March 30, 2024, Béatrice Mazalto invited participants to work from paintings by Joan Mitchell. Mitchell's *Champs* (1990) gave rise to the following figurative prompts: 'colors colliding,' (*couleurs qui se cognent*) 'spreading,' (*étalement*) and 'joyful accumulation' (*accumulation jubilatoire*). The aim was to explore color as a means of eliciting specific movement qualities. All these experiences involve different regimes of semiotization: verbal, gestural, and visual. But they all testify to language as a new preferred tool for somatic experience. As Alice Godfroy (2026) aptly points out, this is made explicit through the renewed emphasis of dance on sensations: since the genesis of movements occurs within us, in a felt and therefore invisible manner, transmission can no longer rely on vision solely; consequently, one seeks to develop an effective language capable of resonating within bodies.

2.3. **Sense-making in real time composition**

While verbal prompts may function as stimuli for dancers' movement, they do not determine it in a linear cause-and-effect relationship. Instead, the sense emerges relationally through the dancers' ongoing co-composition, and in multiple ways. For example, it may be created between partners through a shared object that holds their attention. If someone pulls a chair using a scarf while another adds weight to it (e.g., cushions) in order to slow or stop their motion, when the first person releases the scarf and leaves their hand suspended, a window of opportunity opens, and this gesture may be interpreted by the second person as an invitation to dance.[2] This interpretation depends on the participant's understanding of the situation. A given object generally affords multiple possibilities for action; for example, the suspended hand shown here may be understood as a gesture of receiving something.

Sense can also arise between dancers and musicians in improvisation. For example, if a dancer strikes the floor with their hands while a bassist is performing nearby, the musician may respond by following and integrating the sounds produced by the dancer.[3] In other cases, it may appear as a narrative slowly unfolds. For instance, in

[2] A moment experienced during an evening improvisation performance before an audience, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France), held from August 30 to September 3, 2023.
[3] A moment experienced during the same evening improvisation performance, previously mentioned, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France).

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a group improvisation involving a musician and four dancers, if the musician leans toward their instrument to begin playing and observes that one dancer is eager to start dancing, they may engage with this dynamic by repeatedly delaying the onset of music, thereby generating a narrative of a 'lazy' musician who withholds musical initiation, generating increasing frustration among the dancers.[4]

Finally, to avoid multiplying examples that could never be exhaustive, sense may emerge when a collective improvisation takes a specific direction through space. Thus, in a framework designed by Emma Bigé, in which the rule of action is (approximately) 'to mirror each another in a state of release, allowing oneself, if needed, to be supported by others,' we initially formed small groups before ultimately merging into a single flowing form, recalling the image of an animal's spine in motion.[5]

In these various examples, a situation becomes meaningful for each case in different ways: through specific movements (e.g., a suspended hand) and their interpretation by the other participants, through shared rhythms, through a form of narrativity, and through spatial displacement. More precisely, these examples highlight various ways of relating to others and co-creating sense together. We can move in opposition to a partner (e.g., as they attempt to move forward, we weigh them down), align with them (e.g., they extend a hand and we take it), extend their actions (e.g., forming the remaining vertebrae of a spine; co-constructing a narrative), repeat and transform what they do (e.g., incorporating into music the sounds produced by a dancer on the floor), and so on. These ways of relating to one another become particularly visible through several core notions, such as playing with spatial distance and proximity, exploring differences in levels (low, medium, and high), and working with variations in rhythm and temporality (moving more or less slowly or quickly), among others. In all cases, these dynamics can be understood either as convergent interactions ("yes, and") or as divergent interactions ("no, but") (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). They allow us to understand gesture as 'this generic activity (...) of the constitution of fields and relations' (De Luca 2016: 149, our translation).

Although sketches often provide a simplified representation of reality, they allow me here to materialize how convergent and divergent interactions, for instance, generate distinct lines of force in space and, in this respect, produce sense. Let's take the example of an exercise called "Flocks of birds" in dance improvisation.[6] The first action guideline invites participants (approximately ten), walking freely within a dance

[4] A moment observed during an evening improvisation performance before an audience, at the Valcivières Improvisation Encounters (France), previously mentioned.

[5] Practice proposed on April 27, 2023, in the village of Recoubeau-Jansac (Drôme, France) during the improvisation lab "Les écotones," devoted to "Replays – Questioning the legacies of Lisa Nelson (and her *Tuning Scores*)," co-organized by Alice Godfroy, with workshop facilitators, Anouk Llaurens, Emma Bigé, and Yaïr Barelli.

[6] A moment experienced during a workshop "Reflections, dispersions, flights" led by Patricia Machado at the Performance Lab of the Milieu Institute (Concordia University, Montréal), on August 15, 2024.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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studio, to follow a person of their own choosing (as illustrated in Fig. 1 below). As this is an improvised situation, the range of possible trajectories remains open. Nevertheless, observations made during the practice reveal a recurring pattern: several participants often choose to follow the same individual, thereby creating a flock configuration around that person. Meanwhile, unless the dancer reciprocates by following one of their followers – thus forming a feedback loop – they may instead choose to follow someone involved in another flock. The first illustration attempts to capture this dynamic by showing how one flock can be drawn along by another, producing an overall impression of collective convergence, with bidirectional arrows indicating that a leader in a flock may also be a follower attempting to join another flock. The second action guideline invites each practitioner to stand as far away as possible from another person of their own choosing (as illustrated in Fig. 2 below). Here again, a wide range of trajectories may emerge. Nevertheless, a recurrent pattern can still be observed: except in cases where two participants mutually move away from one another, individuals tend to distance themselves from someone who has, in turn, chosen to distance themselves from another participant, all while continuing to walk through the dance studio. As a result, the person from whom one is attempting to move away may inadvertently come closer, prompting a renewed effort to increase the distance between them. This ongoing process generates alternating patterns of dispersion and intersections across the space, leading to further dispersions, as the second sketch shows.

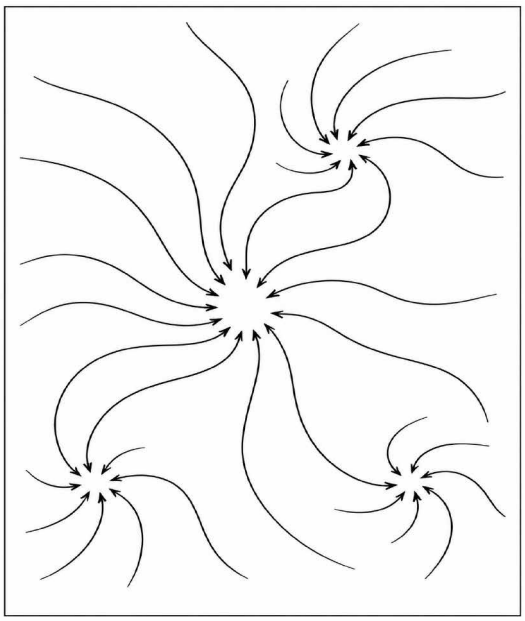


Figure 1. Flocks and collective convergence.
Action guideline: while walking in the studio, each dancer follows a person of their own choosing.

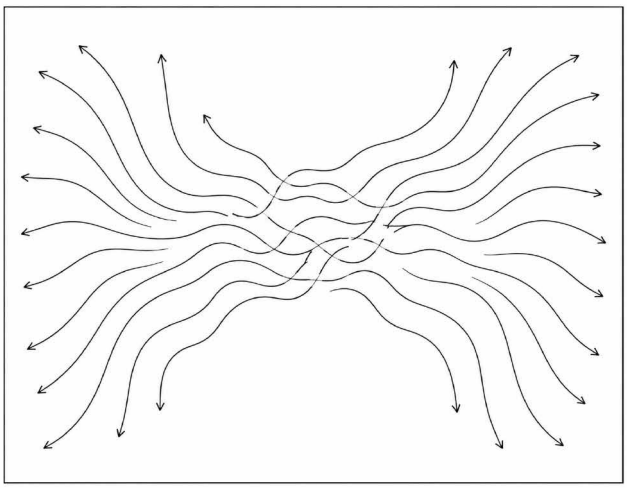


Figure 2. Dispersions and intersections.
Action guideline: while walking in the studio, each dancer stands as far away as possible from a person of their own choosing.

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Finally, we may categorize the principal ways of relating to others – and, in doing so, producing sense – within an improvisational context. Pierre Saint-Germier and Clément Canonne (2022), building on Günther Knoblich, Stephen Butterfill and Nathalie Sebanz's theory of 'emergent coordination,' (2011) mobilize their four sources of emergent coordination to elucidate what is at stake in 'collective free improvisation.' As it allows improvisers to coordinate with one another with no plan to perform action together ("joint improvisation"), it may be indeed characterized as a form of "emergent coordination" (on "emergent collaboration", see also: Sawyer 2000). These four sources are:

(1) ***Entrainment:*** It is 'a process that leads to temporal coordination of two actors' behavior, in particular, synchronization' (Knoblich, Butterfill and Sebanz 2011: 63). This occurs when one allows oneself to be influenced by the rhythm of another's movements, as in the previously described example involving the dancer and the musician. It echoes Landowski's (2005) notion of "contagion" as a mode of implicit, non-verbal, and somatic communication. This term refers to the immediate, body-to-body transmission of a state, muscular tension, movement impulse, rhythm, emotion, and so forth, leading to the emergence of a shared aesthetic experience among the individuals involved.

(2) ***Affordance:*** An object affordance occurs "when two agents have similar action repertoires and perceive the same object, they are likely to engage in similar actions because the object affords the same action for both of them' (Knoblich, Butterfill and Sebanz 2011). But, when 'objects have an affordance for two or more people collectively which is not necessarily an affordance for any of them individually,' (ibid.) it is called a 'joint affordance.' The previous chair example illustrates a case of joint affordance.

(3) ***Perception-action matching:*** This enables 'common action representations.' For instance, 'observing someone dancing will activate corresponding action representations if one knows how to dance' (ibid.: 64) and will lead to the mimicry of the observed actions. This source of emergent coordination was certainly activated during the example of the exercise designed by Bigé (asking to "mirror" each other).

(4) ***Action simulation:*** This implies 'common predictive models.' Here, an observer can 'apply predictive models in his or her motor system to accurately predict the timing and outcomes of observed actions' (ibid.). For example, in the previous narrative example, the musician can anticipate

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0009 | **punctum.gr**

> the dancer's movement by understanding that they are about to begin dancing; in particular, they can grasp the pre-movements that underlie the impulse of the dancer's action. This is what subsequently allows them to disrupt those expectations.

In short, implicit and non-verbal communication are at work in dance improvisation, through various tools to attune with others. However, the existence of these tools (or means) does not prevent the outcome from being experienced as 'magical' by practitioners.

2.4. **Meaning-making through personal and collective feedbacks**

Finally, in improvisation, meaning can be reconstructed afterwards. Indeed, after each exercise or series of similar exercises, participants are usually given time to write, if they wish, in a notebook, what has made sense to them, what they have felt, experienced, and so forth. It takes the form of spontaneous, in-the-moment writing that responds immediately to the lived situation. It is notably characterized by the use of the first person, often in the present tense, and by allowing the writing to unfold freely, without stopping, revising, or attending to the logical articulation between sentences. This constitutes a writing practice that remains grounded in bodily experience while already passing through language, and which could be understood as a form of personal feedback.

To illustrate, at the end of a workshop on "Collective Body" facilitated by Emmanuelle Pépin and the artists of the *DeHor^* project,[7] we experienced moving as a pack with our eyes closed, lightly touching one another while leaving very little space between us. The exercise began by inviting us to move slowly within the pack before progressing to collective movement through space. Following this practice, the following personal reflection remained with me and continues to resonate:

> Lowering many barriers. Sensitive listening creates an atmosphere of trust, without any need to know the people we are with. It is enough simply to be open, to be there, to be present. I experience a profound sense of well-being, something that fills me. I have the feeling of grasping what is essential. (Our translation)

These elements can also be shared orally and collectively. The facilitator often invites participants to gather in a circle to share, if they wish, what they have gone through during the exercises. This stage of collective feedback makes it possible to

[7] A moment experienced during the Festival GO. Élans, on April 10-12, 2026, Espace Magnan, Nice.

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put lived experiences into words, to give them voice – which is not always an easy task – and to observe whether certain experiences converge between participants. In this respect, 'in describing this process of maturing conceptual understandings of experience,' (Nelson et al. 2024: 8) Nara Figueiredo identifies three levels, dimensions, or moments of sense-making:

> (i) the intersubjective connection, (ii) the ability to bring forth words (and symbols in general) based on our repertoire of verbal practices, and (iii) the ability to actively construct verbal meaning with them, which, I believe, involves a back-and-forth mechanism of checking whether chosen words play a role that engages with (construct with) these experiences. (ibid.) (see also: Figueiredo and Cuffari 2022)

Although, in these remarks, Figueiredo is not only referring to individual and collective feedback, but also to subsequent conceptual elaborations, she highlights how "sense-making" is transformed into "verbal meaning." Indeed, in retrospect, the sense-making of an improvisation becomes meaning-making through the feedback process. At this stage, the aim is no longer to structure the unknown or to make sense of what is happening in a situation, but rather to understand how it makes sense for me individually and for us collectively. To do so, as Figueiredo has pointed out, we relate our lived experience to words 'based on our repertoire of verbal practices,' and thus to a certain system of values. I would add that we also relate this experience to other lived experiences, allowing resonances to emerge. Yet one way of making sense of experience – by integrating it into a particular repertoire of words and experiences – is precisely what I previously referred to as "meaning-making."

In short, several layers of sense/meaning coexist before, during, and after an improvisation, which may be summarized as follows: informational stimuli (transmitted through verbal, gestural, visual prompts), sense-making (during the ongoing co-composition), and meaning-making (through which the experience is subsequently integrated thanks to the individual and collective feedback).

3. Further explorations of sense-making in dance improvisation

3.1. What? An open, polyphonic, self-referential and auto-poietic sense

We previously showed that a successful improvisation – in which something happens, rather than mere boredom or failure – highlights sense-making among practitioners. What are, more precisely, the characteristics of this emerging sense?

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0009 | **punctum.gr**

It appears evident that this sense is not pre-given: at the outset, there is no 'sense,' only a void – the void of the play-space – dense with unactualized potential within which improvisation will take place. There may even be a loss of 'meaning,' resulting from the loss of reference points when the improviser chooses to inhibit reflexes, habits, and preferences. Sense is therefore constructed progressively, in real time, among practitioners who share elements of sense when they are attuned with each other, and who might have attuned otherwise, depending on the multiple possibilities of the unfolding situation. I can thus infer a first characteristic: sense-making implies in improvisation an 'open' sense grounded in a 'polyphony of bodies.' The term 'polyphony' derives from music and originally refers to a polyphony of voices (as distinct from heterophony): it involves not the strict dependency between musical lines, but rather 'the independence within the interdependence of the lines' (Sève 2002: 215). That is, 'a plurality of autonomous yet interconnected voices' (ibid.: 278) (our translations), which may produce a harmonious effect to the ear, despite their differences. This concept of 'polyphony,' implying simultaneously autonomy and interconnection, was later extended to other fields, for instance in philosophy of language (Bakhtin 1984), or in linguistics (Ducrot 1984; Perrin 2004). Bakhtin, in his analysis of Dostoevsky's novels, theorizes the "polyphonic text": the author is not the sole voice of the novel, as the voice(s) of the character(s) may at times carry as much weight and autonomy. However, in linguistics, polyphony is not limited to enunciative polyphony – that is, the coexistence of multiple enunciative voices (e.g., distinguishing the speaking subject from the speaker) – nor to the coexistence of multiple enunciative levels within the meaning of a sentence (e.g., distinguishing the words uttered from the viewpoints they express) (Bally 1965; Ducrot 1984). It also encompasses a contextual or pragmatic polyphony, insofar as every proposition echoes or refers to another proposition that has previously been formulated (for instance, by negating it) (Perrin 2004). This system of echoes and references helps to characterize more precisely the kind of polyphony at work in improvisation. As we have seen, the propositions advanced by the participants take the form of 'yes, and' or 'no, but' responses that echo earlier propositions and relate to them (Kimmel and Hristova 2021). Improvisation therefore always involves an 'adjustment' to what others are doing, which, from our perspective, necessarily contains an element of unpredictability (Landowski 2005). This is why, drawing on Paolucci's theory, "sense-making" can be understood as an 'addition of subtractions' (2021): here, we may understand it as a progressive reduction of the space of possibilities through the improvisers' mutually constraining choices, which nonetheless gives rise to new possibilities that none of the participants could have envisaged independently.

Consequently, a second characteristic lies in sense-making's self-referentiality. As Christian Béthune underlines, 'in improvisation, gesture and intention coexist

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simultaneously,' (2009: 1) which is why 'it is always within a semiotic economy that the question of improvisation emerges' (ibid.: 2) (our translations). Put it differently, 'improvisation leads on the contrary, to dismissing the idea of a pre-existing expressible prior to what is expressed, and of an ideal meaning external to formulation' (ibid.: 4) (our translation). The two emerge together: the gesture and the idea it evokes. This could provide a new way of distinguishing between sense and meaning; sense is always situated, whereas meaning may be abstract.

Finally, sense-making in improvisation is not only open-ended and self-referential, but it is also auto-poietic. Indeed, sense is not only devoid of any external referent; it signifies and creates itself. As Henri Maldiney argues, it is not sufficient to assert that a sense is, in the absence of reference, beyond any normative framework (*allégal*), it is also necessary to specify that an unprecedented form emerges – one that is 'free' insofar as it constitutes and generates its own 'signifiance' (2003; 2022). In this respect, he establishes a distinction between a 'meaning' (*signification*) already constituted and a 'signifiance' (*signifiance*) as a self-forming process. He further relates this distinction to a difference between what is 'instituted' (that is, enduring and codified) and what is 'improvised' (that is, momentary and free). Yet he doesn't discuss dance as a form of improvisation nor, paradoxically, does he undertake a sustained examination of improvisation as an art form. Instead, his analysis focuses on the elucidation of art's autopoiesis, especially within poetry and painting. In a philosophy of dance improvisation, this amounts to saying that sense-making emerges from the movements themselves as they are executed, becoming gestures, rather than taking shape outside them, within a predetermined (choreographic) project. In the same way that 'poetry is a perpetual renewal of language' (of words) (Maldiney 2003: 74, our translation), dance improvisation provides a continual renewal of the vocabulary of body language.

3.2. How? Skills and feedback loops

3.2.1 *Cognitive and intuitive skills*

In addition to obvious motor skills (for instance, those related to the 'perception–action matching' and 'action simulation' described above), improvisers also rely on cognitive and intuitive skills to collectively compose a situation and give it sense.

As previously discussed, with reference to Kent de Spain (2014), improvisers construct a mental representation of a situation (mapping), through the process of tracking what they observe, imagine, and retain in memory. Tracking thus constitutes a cognitive activity. As he asserts, 'by analyzing such patterns [e.g. a pattern recognition or an image recognition] [...] I can choose to join in, or continue with, or develop, or set up a counterpoint to whatever has been created; or to break it off and move into something else' (ibid.: 136). Tracking is thus intrinsically linked to analyzing. It can

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0009 | **punctum.gr**

also imply, to a certain extent, planning or what Kent de Spain names a 'predictive understanding,' that is an understanding turned towards the future to analyze what will happen, for instance, if nothing is changed in the situation. In sum, this demonstrates a mode of thinking in action – what might be described as 'thinking in movement' (ibid.: 53) – which lies at the core of improvisational practice and real-time decision-making. As Erin Manning, known for her contributions to research-creation (Manning and Massumi 2014), emphasizes in this regard: thought is not 'proposed' to a movement; 'thought moves a body' (2009: 6). Such thinking in action may therefore be of interest to both enactivist and cognitivist approaches, notably by raising the question of the brain's involvement in this process.

In neuroscience, it is commonly acknowledged that there is a strong relationship between the brain and habits. Because the brain would be overburdened if it had to consciously regulate every action, it tends to operate in an 'automatic mode' supported by habits. This enables savings in time, energy, and efficiency. Conversely, improvisation practice often involves resisting or deviating from established habits and familiar patterns, as outlined previously. In this respect, several tools are used in improvisation to disrupt the brain's usual patterns. As Hagendoorn highlights, when the body persistently alters its leading movement, 'the brain can be put on the wrong track, thus raising the awareness of the viewer, who will have to work harder to follow the movement' (2003: 226). For example, speed also prevents the brain from keeping up with movements, while flow prevents it from overthinking before acting or anticipating the next move. As a result, if the brain is unsettled by improvisational tools, the 'thinking in action' cannot be understood as a predominantly cerebral process, despite its apparent link to situational analysis. For this reason, Kent De Spain argues that improvisation may mobilize other regions of the brain, which are less associated with rational thought and more with instinctive or animal-like responses: 'A portion of this skill is situated in the limbic system – the subconscious, preconscious animal brain – but much of it falls within the realm of consciousness (broadly defined)' (2014: 10-11). These considerations thus invite me to pursue an account of how sense is generated in improvisation by examining other, less rational skills, namely intuitive skills.

This thinking in action indeed comes close to an embodied, sensorial intelligence, one that proves particularly consonant with an intuitive grasp of the situation. Insofar as intuition constitutes a direct and immediate mode of seizing reality in its singularity (Bergson 1912), it facilitates an instantaneous understanding of the situation as well as a heightened bodily responsiveness – not in the form of an automatic reaction but of a singular response. More specifically, since intuition involves grasping reality from within, rather than analyzing it from the outside (ibid.), 'it evolves an expanded state of consciousness' (Hardman 2021: 2), where the boundaries between the self and the

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external world become attenuated. Hardman evokes a 'surrender of the ego'(ibid.: 1) and 'a sense of abandon' (ibid.: 4). However, in improvisation, it is less a question of ego loss than of being 'ego-less' (Saladin 2014: 94), insofar as rationality and brain's activity do not disappear; rather, they learn to recede, to listen, and to render themselves available and open to the situation. This open approach 'is therefore a way of being in the world which is comfortable with an ever-changing fluidity and uncertainty' (Hardman 2021: 4) despite our initial plans or expectations, making it easier to form new connections and thus to foster creativity. In short, participating from within in a situation as it unfolds, offering immediate and singular responses that remain open to its fluctuations – and may therefore shift our initial intentions – constitute essential features of intuitive skills, enabling improvisers to create sense together.

Furthermore, the expanded state of consciousness previously discussed in relation to intuition not only facilitates openness to the surrounding world, but also enables participants in improvisation to transition from an individual mode of consciousness to a collective one. As Julien Laroche, cited by Asaf Bachrach, remarks in his report on his experience of The Blind Unison Trio [8] (a score conceived by Lisa Nelson):

> A thing about this moment was an atmosphere of "confidence", the confidence that I was into "something" (in the sense, a something that is happening at a larger scale than me), that I was following a flow that surrounded me, rather than inside me. (Nelson et al. 2024: 4)

For Bachrach, the experience of Laroche is a phenomenological experience of intuition. It corresponds, more precisely, to the phenomenon of feeling held and participating in, something greater than oneself – a Whole that transcends and encompasses us – thereby forming a sense of unity and a collective consciousness of the situation (Randazzo 2025). This collective consciousness therefore constitutes an important component of the process of making sense together in improvisation and relies significantly on intuitive skills.

Ultimately, through these cognitive and intuitive skills that enable improvisers to generate sense in real time, 'the dancer's attention is brought to the multiplicity of feedback loops' (Nelson et al. 2024: 5) (quote from Asaf Bachrach) between action and perception, as well as between the dancer and others.

[8] It is a performance score for a group of four or more people. Participants are divided into actors and watchers. Some instructions are given to the participants (and several versions of this score exist). For instance, three people enter a space with the intention of beginning with a visual unison stillness (e.g., they initially share the same shape or contribute to the same image). Then, one of them says "BEGIN," and the actors close their eyes, trying to imagine what the other two are doing. The watchers are responsible for the safety of the actors and can say "OPEN" (the eyes) or "PAUSE" at any moment. They also can wave their hands when they perceive a moment of unison. Finally, after three minutes have passed, someone says "END."

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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3.2.2 *Feedback loops in the autopoietic process of sense-making*

Sense-making does not rely only on the improvisers' skills, but also on the exchanges between them. These exchanges take the temporal form of feedback loops.

In improvisation, participants engage in ongoing mutual responsiveness. The mental map that an improviser develops through successive choices cannot be reduced to a purely reflective process (where they maintain a reflective awareness of their prior actions); it is also a recursive process, in which the outcome or output of an earlier action (for instance, introduced by a partner) becomes the input or the starting point for a subsequent action by another participant. Such elements may be understood as cues that are reintegrated in real time through the recursive interplay of improvisation, contributing to the emergence of collective sense-making. It is in this respect that Alessandro Bertinetto invokes 'an open autopoietic system,' a 'feedback loop' process, or a 'recursive' process (2022). He further argues that it is in this manner that improvisation 'makes sense' as a process of 'sense-making' (ibid.).

More precisely, drawing on Bertinetto's terminology, two aspects may be distinguished within this 'feedback loop' process. First, a process of 'feedforward'[9] (*retroalimentazione*) supports creativity and the invention of future actions, insofar as prior actions function as emergent conditions for subsequent ones. Second, a process of 'feedback' (*retroazione*) is also at work, whereby actions that emerge at a later stage may retrospectively confer sense and value upon earlier actions, thus operating retroactively upon them. This dynamic is particularly salient in cases of 'error.' For example, an improviser may produce an action that deviates entirely from the established framework for action. If three dancers are moving along a horizontal line on the floor and one decides to explore the surrounding space, this constitutes a rupture with the operative frame and may be construed as an 'error' if it is not taken up by the other participants.[10] However, insofar as the other dancers appropriate this deviation and likewise depart from the line, they retrospectively revalue the initial action: it no longer appears as an error external to the frame, but as a condition for the emergence of a new frame for action.

In fine, although sense-making in improvisation occurs in real time, that is, in the present, the logic of the 'feedback loop' indicates that it simultaneously opens onto other temporal horizons oriented toward both past and future. This is why some scholars argue that improvisation is not something that is constructed in time, but rather that it is itself temporal: 'The time in which everything takes place is now' (Bertinetto 2016: 223) (our translation):

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[9] Bertinetto is not always particularly precise in drawing this terminological distinction between *retroazione* and *retroalimentazione*. Thus, in *Eseguire l'inatteso* (2016), he translates *retroalimentazione* as *feedback*, and this is the term he generally employs.

[10] An example drawn from a moment experienced during an advanced improvisation workshop led by Laura Aris Álvarez at the Circuit-Est choreographic center (Montreal), on May 13-17, 2024.

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> This 'now,' however, is not merely the chronological now measurable by the clock, in which the performance is occurring. Rather, it is the 'now' saturated with past and future, the kairological time, that time which is the right time for a specific experience.' (ibid.) (our translation)

In sum, it is quite remarkable that improvisers, in real time, succeed in 'making a common sense' (Bertinetto 2022). This is even more striking insofar as this semiosis here does not conform to a linear logic: it is governed by a circular logic, a 'feedback loop,' which destabilizes the distinction between sender and receiver, insofar as improvisers mutually influence and respond to one another.

4. A few concluding words

In the end, I have shown how verbal, gestural, and visual prompts convey meaning to practitioners, before examining how sense-making emerges during improvisation through multiple modes of interaction and mutual attunement, drawing on motor, cognitive, and intuitive skills and sustained by continuous feedback loops. I then demonstrated how meaning-making takes shape through the personal and collective feedback processes that follow an improvisation session. All these aspects shed light on collective creativity, where authorship undergoes a process of diffraction. That's why it may also be called a form of 'distributed creativity' (Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). In doing so, it provides a framework for further interrogating collective composition in contemporary dance, as in Pina Bausch's Kontakthof (1978), which was created from dancers' improvisations sparked by the choreographer's prompts – such as 'Show me how you seduce.' The piece subsequently takes the form of a montage of these diverse responses (meaning-making), reworked and shaped into a series of short scenes.

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Improvisation in dance and embodied cognition. An enactive semiotic perspective on thermoception

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary dance scholarship, improvisation is a privileged site for examining the relationship between embodied cognition and meaning-making. From the perspective of "enactive semiotics" (Paolucci 2021), improvisation cannot be reduced to a purely individual expressive flow, but must be understood as a situated practice in which the body functions as an agent capable of exploring and actualizing movement potentials within a material, social, and cultural environment. Within this theoretical framework, this article extends the semiotic analysis of improvisation through the study of Gaga dance practice, introducing a largely underexplored experiential dimension: thermoception, understood as the set of sensations of heat and cold that traverse and modulate the moving body. Through an analysis of Gaga's metaphorical and pedagogical language, the article shows how verbal imagery activates thermoceptive awareness, thereby reorganizing sensorimotor dynamics in real time during improvisation. In this account, thermoception does not function as a mere physiological background condition, but as a regulatory and generative dimension of embodied meaning-making. It participates in the co-emergence of physiological dynamics, affective attunement, and expressive and interpretive processes, operating as an active variable in the microgenesis of movement in improvisational performance.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the 21st century, Bruno Latour urged us to regard the human body as an interface. *In How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science* (2004), Latour describes the human body as something that is progressively acquired, depending on the elements with which it enters into relation. He proposes a 'pathological' conception of the body, understood as capable of being affected and transformed by the relations in which it is involved. Rather than conceiving the human body as a stable and 'fixed' entity,[1] we should instead perceive it as an interface that learns to be influenced by different material interactions. The body, in other words, is not a generic preformed starting point from which experience unfolds, but the effect of a series of relations that structure its descriptive and experiential possibilities, as it is constantly 'engaged' in a process of material and aesthetic exchange.[2]

In line with the notion of the body as an interface proposed by Latour, Tim Ingold's concept of 'enskilment' (2000) describes a form of 'understanding in practice,' in which exposure to specific sensory stimuli enables, over time, the ability to distinguish things on the basis of subtle cues that an inexperienced subject might even fail to notice. In the literature on sensory enskilment developed from Ingold's attention to embodied modes of knowledge, numerous examples emerge: from the acquisition of the dexterity required to modulate pressure, rhythm, and intonation in cello performance (Sennett 2008), to the development of auditory capacities such as the recognition and classification of urban soundscapes and technological signals (Bijsterveld 2019), and visual capacities such as training the gaze to detect patterns, anomalies, or morphological qualities in specific contexts (Grasseni 2004).

A specific form of sensory enskilment is offered by contemporary dance practices[3], particularly through improvisational exercises within the Gaga technique. Gaga is a movement language developed by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin in the 1990s, which is fundamentally a somatic practice aimed at amplifying bodily

[1] As Elisabeth Grosz suggests, among others, in *Notes Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1989), the human body is never given once and for all, but instead takes shape as an open-ended process, shaped by biological, cultural, and political forces that continually redefine its limits and possibilities.

[2] In relation to the *Material Engagement Theory* developed by Lambros Malafouris (2013), mind and matter are not separate entities but instead co-emerge through practices of interaction. From this perspective, cognitive processes are not located exclusively in the brain but are distributed across the dynamic circuits that link subjects, environments, and objects. Material engagement thus describes the way in which human action and thought take shape through continuous exchange with things, the so-called 'thinging.'

[3] By 'contemporary dance' we refer here to a heterogeneous set of choreographic practices developed since the second half of the twentieth century, which emphasize approaches and techniques centred on somatic awareness, relational engagement with the environment, and sensory experimentation, such as contact improvisation or somatic practices (for example Feldenkrais or Body-Mind Centering). Within this context, contemporary dance can be understood as a privileged field of sensory enskilment, in which the body is progressively trained to perceive, modulate, and differentiate subtle qualities of movement and sensation.

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sensitivity and reorganizing the perceptual experience of movement.[4] Gaga classes operate through a series of verbal instructions, mainly conveyed in the form of evocative imagery, which guide attention toward micro-sensations, variations in gestural intensity, dynamic qualities, and relationships between different parts of one's own body and that of others. Guided improvisation, a central element of Gaga practice, opens up an exploratory mode of choreographic action through which the body gradually learns to be 'affected' by increasingly subtle stimuli, developing sensory discrimination capacities that were previously latent. As occurs during improvisational sessions, the expressivity of the dancing body is conditioned by the articulatory possibilities of the body itself, which become progressively available to the dancer.[5] In Gaga practice, the subject is constantly required to modulate movement in response to internal feedback (proprioception, balance, muscular tension and elasticity) and external cues (atmospheres, sounds, the presence of others), activating a circuit between perception, listening, attention, and action.[6] The dancer's body thus emerges as a site of ongoing negotiation between sedimented habits and emerging potentials, between consolidated motor schemas and new gestural patterns generated through interaction with the instructor's prompts. In this perspective, Gaga improvisation practice is a peculiar 'technique of the body' (Mauss 1934) which, when practised, can reorganize perceptual thresholds and expand the repertoire of motor possibilities and thereby reinforcing Latour's idea of the body as a dynamic and porous interface, continually redefined by the relations in which it is embedded.[7]

[4] Gaga is structured into two distinct tracks: Gaga/dancers, which constitutes the daily training of members of the Batsheva Dance Company and is now also taught to other dancers in Israel and abroad, and Gaga/people, which is open to the general public and accessible to anyone, of any age, without the need for prior experience.

[5] The idea that improvisation draws on a bodily repertoire that is built over time is shared by several theoretical perspectives. Susan Leigh Foster (1995) describes the dancer's body as a dynamic archive of motor patterns and expressive possibilities sedimented through practice, which are reactivated and reorganised in the improvisational act. Similarly, André Lepecki (2006) emphasises that improvisation is not pure spontaneity, but a field of emergence in which already learned bodily traces surface, while Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) highlights the kinesthetic and processual nature of movement, understood as embodied knowledge unfolding in time. From this perspective, the body can be understood as a living archive, whose possibilities progressively expand through experience and practice.

[6] This article combines a theoretical analysis of Gaga practice with a phenomenologically informed examination of its experiential dimension. The description of Gaga classes draws on the author's first-person experience as a practitioner of Gaga, developed during his work as a dancer at the Friedrichstadt-Palast in Berlin, where he participated in several Gaga classes led by a certified Gaga teacher invited to work with the company in 2021. This experiential dimension is employed as a phenomenological entry point into the structures of bodily experience elicited by the practice. The aim is to investigate how specific pedagogical devices – particularly verbal instructions, attentional exercises, and sensory explorations – configure conditions for embodied meaning-making.

[7] By 'technique of the body' we refer here to a set of practices, techniques, and *dispositifs* that intervene in the formation and modulation of bodily capacities, shaping the ways in which the body perceives, moves, and relates to its environment. The classical reference is Marcel Mauss, who in his essay Les techniques du corps (1934) defines body techniques as the ways in which people, society by society, make use of their bodies in habitual and socially conditioned ways. From this perspective, the body is never purely natural, but always already culturally formed through incorporated habits, codes, and forms of education.

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1. Reactivating thermoception

In contemporary debates on dance, improvisation has emerged as a privileged site for investigating the relationship between embodied cognition and processes of signification (Carmona 2018; Lindberg Marin, and Silverman 2021; Ravn and Høffding 2022). Recent contributions in aesthetics and semiotics have further emphasized that improvisation should be understood as a process in which meaning is progressively negotiated through bodily, material, and relational constraints (Bertinetto 2013; De Luca 2017). Drawing on the perspective of 'enactive semiotics' (Paolucci 2021), according to which semiosis arises from dynamic processes of coupling between organism and environment,[8] this contribution seeks to extend the semiotic analysis of improvisation in dance by introducing a hitherto underexplored dimension: thermoception, namely the set of sensations of heat and cold that traverse and modulate the moving body.

In the context of Gaga technique, improvisation appears as a radically situated yet guided practice,[9] in which the dancer is constantly solicited by a dual dynamic: on the one hand, the verbal stimuli of the teacher, which function as semiotic devices capable of orienting attention and configuring fields of perceptual-motor possibilities; on the other, the emergence of internal micro-sensations – among which thermoception – that constitute the immediate terrain on which such stimuli are actualized in the dancer's movements. Indeed, participants are invited to shift their focus toward weight, joints, skin, internal organs, and flows of energy. Instructions accumulate layer upon layer: a dancer may simultaneously attend to the sensation of the feet on the floor, the expansion of the spine, the elasticity of the flesh, and the circulation of heat through the body. Rather than functioning as representations to be translated into movement, these instructions operate as constraints that reorganize perception and action. From this perspective, the dancer does not merely execute or interpret instructions but operates as a 'semiotic agent' that continuously translates, modulates, and reorganizes movement on the basis of the sensory anchoring provided by its experiential situation (see Kimmel 2012; Kimmel and Hristova 2021). Meaning therefore neither precedes action nor resides solely in the teacher's language but co-emerges within the dynamic circuit linking verbal enunciation and embodied

[8] The notion of 'enactive semiotics,' developed by Paolucci (2021), is situated at the intersection of pragmatist semiotics, embodied cognition, and enactivism, and is based on the idea that signification is not the result of processes of symbolic encoding and decoding, nor a prior mental representation of action, but rather the situated and dynamic emergence of forms of meaning within the structural coupling between organism and environment. From this perspective, semiosis becomes a relational and processual event that takes shape in the bodily, perceptual, and material practices through which an organism coordinates itself with its environment.

[9] While this interplay between verbal cueing and embodied sensation is not exclusive to Gaga and characterises many contemporary dance pedagogies based on improvisation and somatic attention (see, e.g., Sheets-Johnstone 1999; Batson and Sentler 2017), Gaga places a distinctive emphasis on the continuous generation of movement through richly metaphorical verbal instructions addressed to dancers' immediate sensory experience.

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experience: guiding 'phrases' are immediately grounded in proprioceptive configurations (including thermoceptive ones) that orient and inform improvisation. The result is an 'experiential semiotics' (Helbo 2016) in which movement becomes a generative site of meaning, and in which – following Sheets-Johnstone (2019) – the relation between lived experience and conceptualization should not be understood as a process of translation, but rather as a situated and guided structural co-emergence.[10] As the author recalls, this approach can be traced in the pages Jean Piaget devotes to 'practical or sensory-motor intelligence,' which he seeks to describe in terms of a 'logic of action' (1970: 41-46), namely a form of organization of meaning that is not grounded in abstract representations, but in operative schemes emerging from the interaction between perception and movement. Sensory-motor intelligence does not constitute a preliminary or inferior stage with respect to symbolic thought, but rather a constitutive mode of meaning production rooted in embodied action. It is precisely from this conception of sensory-motor intelligence as an embodied organization of meaning that it becomes possible to shift attention toward specific perceptual modalities within improvisational practices, and in particular, toward thermoception.

Within anthropological theories of the senses, sensory studies, and social phenomenology – among the very few domains that have attempted to articulate a qualitative approach to the bodily sensation of heat and cold – thermoception has been conceptualized as a specification of touch, capable of extending both within the human body and across its peripheries in a 'trans-frontier' manner (Potter 2008; Vannini and Taggart 2014). Thermoception has primarily been the object of studies on tactile sensation. Thermoception does not exist as a distinct sensory domain; rather, it has become a field of inquiry heavily dependent on its primary sense, touch. This dependence of thermoception on touch has likely prevented it from becoming an autonomous field of study (Galimberti 2023). In effect, this has led to a tendency to analyze thermoception mainly within somatosensory processes, often obscuring its potential as a specific and independent domain of investigation, capable of more deeply exploring the unique dynamics of heat perception, particularly in relation to the interaction between percept and environment. Indeed, we perceive the heat of fire at a distance, the warmth of the sun, and we are affected by cold drafts in the corner of a room – all forms of thermoception distinct from

[10] This shift toward an 'experiential' or embodied semiotics is part of a broader contemporary rethinking of meaning theory, which has progressively challenged structuralist and computational models of semiosis as systems of abstract encoding and decoding (Zlatev 2012). Building on the dialogue between semiotics, phenomenology, and enactivism, meaning is increasingly conceived as emerging from situated practices of experience, in which perception, action, and interpretation are co-implicated levels of a single sense-making process.

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'tactility' in the strict sense, derived from direct bodily contact, such as the warmth of our skin when we blush, or the pressure we feel when handling objects. This 'haptic' element[11] appears at the experiential and phenomenological level to be fundamentally different from direct tactile experience. This experiential difference between concrete, proximal, mechanical touch (which can reveal – and indeed does reveal – temperature as an object property) and the broader haptic experience of perceiving the heat or cold 'trace' of a source at a distance provides a criterion for distinguishing touch from thermoception.[12]

What the continuity between touch and thermoception can teach us, however, is that, as a tactile perceptual modality, thermoception cannot be switched off: I cannot silence thermoception (as I might by closing my eyes or covering my ears), because I am always being touched by heat and cold, and there is no way to deactivate the concrete effects of this connection. In this sense, thermoception is a highly salient sensory modality from the point of view of lived experience, because every environment, object, or event warms us or cools us, and it is difficult not to notice this effect. However, unlike touch and all other sensory domains, thermal sense simultaneously produces information and transformation: when I touch an ice cube and perceive its coldness, that very coldness is already making me colder in return. Although no perceptual information is ever neutral (Merleau-Ponty 1945),[13] it would be difficult to conceive of a situation in which, by touching a rough surface, I become rougher, or in which the sweetness of food makes me sweet. Perceiving a thermal action always implies being affected by it, because it reflects what is happening directly to the body. For this reason, thermoception, more than other sensory modalities, can be deceptive. Our cutaneous

[11] The term 'haptic' in contemporary visual culture, designates a mode of experiencing images that exceeds pure optical vision and involves a dimension of sensory proximity, intensity, and 'quasi-contact' with the visible. In this perspective, developed by authors such as Laura U. Marks, the haptic refers to a regime of the gaze that moves close to the surfaces of images, privileging texture, granularity, and perceptual affectivity over perspectival distance and traditional optical representation. In studies of human-machine interaction, however, the haptic takes on a technical-operational meaning, referring to haptic feedback systems that return sensations of force, vibration, or resistance to the user's body, making the digital dimension physically experiential and incorporated into action. A polyphonic notion thus emerges, in which the haptic oscillates between an aesthetic-perceptual experience of the image and the technological infrastructure of mediated sensoriality, while being united by the idea of a form of knowledge that passes through embodied modes of contact rather than exclusively visual ones.

[12] Moreover, thermoception is inherently plural and interconnected with other sensory systems. In fact, the specificity of thermoception lies in the fact that it involves several physical mechanisms simultaneously (Fulkerson 2014): it provides awareness of and regulation over our internal body temperature, it works in tandem with the tactile system to inform us about the environmental qualities of our surroundings, and it plays a critical role in our experience of physical pain caused by extreme heat and cold stimuli.'

[13] Maurice Merleau-Ponty develops a theory of perception no longer understood as a passive process of recording objective data, but as an embodied mode of openness to the world. In *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty shows how perceiving is intrinsically intertwined with the subject's corporeality: every perceptual act already implies a pre-reflective relation between body and world, in which what is perceived also modifies, however minimally, the lived condition of the perceiving subject. In this sense, perception is never a neutral access to external properties, but an event that simultaneously involves and transforms the perceiving body.'

receptors, when exposed to a heat source, perceive the coldness of a subsequent source differently than they would in its absence. Heat and cold leave a trace of their effects that persists over time and shifts our perception. It is a familiar experience: if I spend time touching a cold object, I adapt to that condition, partially inheriting its coldness. This leads me to perceive as warmer a body that I would otherwise have judged as merely lukewarm, to put it euphemistically. The same occurs in reverse. Thermoception is thus a 'sense with a highly subjective nature' (Antunes 2016: 10).[14]

Although thermoception borders precariously on subjectivism (Starosielski 2021), there is a wide range of metaphors that draw upon it. Why do we describe enthusiasm as 'burning,' lovers as 'burning with desire,' a murderer as 'cold-blooded,' a reactive person as 'hot-tempered,' or a prolonged period of geopolitical tension under the threat of nuclear catastrophe as the 'Cold War'? Or again, why do we say that 'things are about to heat up,' and why are 'hot zones' those characterized by conflict and instability (See Garcia 2025)? As Gaston Bachelard (1964) argues, 'metaphors are not simple idealizations that take off like rockets only to reveal their insignificance by exploding in the sky' (109). Rather, they are semiotic systems that are concretely grounded in sensory experience.[15]

The central hypothesis of this paper is that thermoception functions as an active semiotic variable in the regulation of improvisational practices, contributing to the modulation of gestural qualities, attentional regimes, and interactional dynamics. I argue that, far from being a merely physiological datum, bodily heat participates in processes of meaning attribution by orienting motor choices and shaping the expressive configurations that emerge during action. This contribution aligns with recent research approaches that conceptualize improvisation as a form of joint action and emergent coordination (Sebanz, Bekkering, and Knoblich 2006; Ravn 2020). I will argue that thermoception does not simply constitute a perceptual background of action, but rather functions as a genuine enactive resource capable of continuously orienting and reorganizing the field of improvisational experience.

[14] The phenomenon described recalls the famous 'buckets of water' experiment discussed by John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke invites the reader to immerse one hand in hot water and the other in cold water and then place both in a vessel of lukewarm water: the same water will be perceived simultaneously as cold by one hand and hot by the other. This example is used to show that sensible qualities are not objective properties of things, but relational effects that depend on the condition of the perceiving body.

[15] Drawing on cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), metaphor is conceived as a mechanism through which abstract domains are understood in terms of schemas grounded in bodily and sensory experience. From this perspective, expressions such as 'warm,' 'cold,' or 'burning' do not merely describe physical states, but organize complex semantic fields – emotional, political, and relational – revealing how language is deeply intertwined with embodied modes of perception.

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2. The dancer's body-as-instrument

Paying attention to the body – or, using Thomas J. Csordas's (1993) formulation, 'somatic modes of attention' – through thermoception is inherent to and deeply embedded in the identity of professional contemporary dance communities. More precisely, such attention does not constitute a merely individual disposition, but rather an acquired competence that becomes sedimented through shared practices and regimes of practical and perceptual training. In the study of contemporary dance, dancers learn to attune to their bodily sensations and to acquire sensory competencies within a system of embodied practices and gestural exercises that continuously stimulate salient 'sensorimotor associations' (Noë 2004).[16] These associations configure an embodied practical knowledge that enables the dancer to orient themselves in a fine-grained way within their field of bodily experience.

It is enough to consider warm-up exercises, which precede every choreographic practice, designed not only to increase the body's internal temperature, but also as a set of bodily practices aimed at optimizing the dancer's perceptual-motor availability, improving bodily performance during practice, and preventing injuries (Alter 2004; Wyon 2010). During the warm-up, skin temperature rises and sweat begins to cover the body while internal heat is released into the surrounding air; muscles gradually become more mobile, making deeper stretching possible. From a physiological standpoint, such transformations involve a reorganization of blood circulation processes, thermal conduction, and neuromuscular activation, all of which directly affect the quality of the dancer's action. Moreover, being too cold during classes or rehearsals is often associated with a potential cause of injury (Potter 2008), as it limits muscle elasticity and neuromotor responsiveness (McGowan et al. 2015). Above all, however, the warm-up implies the idea that one's embodied instrument is 'ready for use' in relation to the subsequent improvisational practice. For a dancer, the sensation of heat achieved through the warm-up phase corresponds to a feeling of internal energy, physical readiness, and 'embodied presence' (Sheets-Johnstone 2011).[17]

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[16] Alva Noë's enactivist approach (2004) is situated within the broader framework of embodied and situated cognition theories, proposing a conception of perception in terms of a form of 'exploratory activity' of the subject in the world. From this perspective, perceiving means implicitly mastering a set of sensorimotor contingencies, that is, practical regularities linking variations in sensory input to the body's possibilities for movement and intervention in the environment. Perception is therefore an active skill, grounded in bodily practice and in the learning of action-perception patterns. Noë developed these reflections in direct dialogue with artistic and performative practices, working closely with dancers and choreographers and using dance as a privileged domain for empirically exploring the implications of his theory of active perception.

[17] In the phenomenology of movement developed by Sheets-Johnstone, presence corresponds to a dynamic quality of embodied living: a being-present that manifests itself in kinesthesia, in tonal modulation, and in the flow of movement itself; a form of pre-reflective and situated attention in which the subject is fully immersed in their own doing, sensitive to variations in intensity, rhythm, and direction of their body in relation to the environment. In dance practice, such a condition emerges as a mode of active and immediate presence, in which perception and action coincide and are co-generated in movement.

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Indeed, dancers are trained to strategically perceive their own action possibilities, recognize them, and exploit them on the fly.

Following the developments of the theory of 'affordances' (Gibson 1979)[18] in an enactive key (Chemero 2009; Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014), I argue that such action possibilities emerge from a dynamic coupling between the dancer's lived body in the first person and their own 'body-as-instrument'[19]: the dancer's body is their working instrument. From this perspective, affordances designate what the body can do here and now, depending on its momentary state (tonic, perceptual, thermoceptive). They are therefore not simply 'given,' but are continuously modulated and made salient within the course of action: they emerge, transform, and are selected within the flow of improvisation. It is precisely as a sensitive and self-organizing system that the dancer's body-as-instrument renders available affordances that are actualized through an embodied knowledge integrating perception and action. Dancers' routines enable them to negotiate gestures, steps, and practicable configurations, aided by their knowledge of nodal points – physiological constraints, motor habits, and perceptual orientations that converge – where the elements of improvisation can more easily take root. Thus, the dancer's body can be understood as a sensitive and adaptive system that, through self-perception, regulates in real time the thresholds of possibility, constraining and enabling specific movement trajectories and expressive configurations. Thermoception –understood here as, among other things, an index of physical readiness and bodily presence to itself – functions as a regulatory parameter that helps calibrate the intensity, amplitude, and sustainability of gesture.

Thermal sensations are deeply embedded in the dancer's bodily history, including years of training, warm-up practices, and affective memories associated with exertion, fatigue, physical contact, and the presence of others. As such, they participate in the constitution of regimes of meaning that inform both the emergence of movement and its expressive dimension. If thinking and acting in dance can be understood as the manipulation of sensible differences within a culturally regulated practical apparatus (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014), thermoception contributes to this process as a modulating factor that shapes possibilities for action and strategies of

[18] The concept of 'affordance,' introduced by James J. Gibson in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), designates the action possibilities that the environment offers to an organism in relation to its bodily and perceptual capacities. From this perspective, perceiving already means orienting oneself toward action: what is apprehended is not a representation of the world, but its "practicability" in relation to the motor and sensory possibilities of the subject.

[19] The expression 'body-as-instrument' should not be understood in a purely metaphorical or external sense, but rather as indicating a deep process of incorporation between the dancer and their body, which functions as a sensitive and operative medium of action. The body constitutes a kind of 'second skin' through which movement takes shape and meaning, in a way that is analogous to the relationship between a musician and their instrument or an athlete and the equipment they use. However, unlike these cases, the body is not an object separate from the acting subject but coincides with it: it is both instrument and condition of experience. In this sense, the dancer does not 'use' the body, but rather acts through it, within a dynamic circuit in which perception, action, and awareness continuously co-determine one another.

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embodied signification, thereby offering an original perspective on the relationship between dance and cognition. In this sense, thermal perception can be understood as a form of 'affective attunement' (Stern 1985) that orients the quality of movement and the relation to the environment and to other bodies.

This phenomenological and descriptive work on thermoception is particularly delicate because it leads us into regions of experience that appear pre-egoic: 'vasodilation and vasoconstriction are not experienced as such, but as a general unfolding and folding, revealing and closing of the (bodily) self, and both are involuntary [...], which confirms the pre-personal dimension of perception' (Diaconu 2024: 58). From this perspective, the pre-subjective primarily refers to a set of molecular, biological, and metabolic processes that constitute the very condition of possibility of embodied experience (Foerster 2021).

Thermoception, in particular, can be read as the sensible manifestation of thermodynamic and regulatory dynamics operating at an infra-representational level but having direct effects on the organization of movement.[20] It is precisely from this level that Gaga somatic practices prove particularly relevant. Gaga practice can thus be understood as a technique of guided re-emergence, in which the teacher's verbal instruction functions as a semiotic trigger that solicits and orients perceptual and experiential processes already unfolding at a pre-reflective level. Verbal cues – often metaphorical, evocative, or synesthetic – activate the dancer to explore sensory configurations (including thermoceptive ones) that become immediately operative in the generation of movement. Such instructions function as soft constraints that orient the improvisational flow. Language thus operates as a modulatory device: it channels attention and amplifies specific perceptual thresholds, rendering certain affordances of the dancer's body-as-instrument more salient than others.

A dynamic of co-emergence therefore arises in which language, perception, and movement are articulated within a single operative circuit: the teacher's voice intervenes at a pre-conscious and pre-intentional level, while the dancer responds by translating these evocations into kinetic trajectories of improvisation. It is precisely within this circuit that dance improvisation – and in particular that produced within Gaga practice – can be conceived as a paradigmatic case of enactive semiosis, in which improvisational practice emerges from the interaction of biological constraints, sensorimotor modulations, and semiotic orientations, without being reducible to any of these levels taken in isolation.

[20] Desiree Foerster (2021) develops an aesthetic perspective that can be described as 'metabolic,' in which sensory experience is conceived as emerging from bodily processes of energy transformation, regulation, and exchange with the environment. Within this framework, the body is not a static entity but a dynamic system traversed by biochemical and thermal flows that constitute the pre-reflective level of experience. Foerster's metabolic aesthetics thus sits at the intersection of phenomenology and the life sciences, insisting that perception and the production of meaning are rooted in infra-subjective and material processes that precede the formation of the conscious 'I,' while nevertheless constitutively shaping its modes of experience and action.

3. The thermal metaphors of Gaga practice

> Imagine a culture in which a discussion is seen as a dance, participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5)

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argue that the recognition of meaning is an essential event in human capacities for understanding, and current studies in 4E cognition[21] consider structures of rationality, including logical thought, as dependent on processes that organize bodily experience through imagination, evocation, and recollection. The poetic 'scenarios' of Gaga challenge the participant's capacity for embodiment, requiring them to respond to images and to surrender to kinesthetic experience through multitasking and through the multiple layers of already present non-verbal experience that are to be elicited.

Gaga practice involves the articulation of somatic knowledge and the ability to attune to one's own bodily listening together with the teacher's voice.[22] I argue that Gaga improvisational practice stages a form of 'enactive semiosis' that integrates perception, action, and signification. It is precisely as a sensitive, self-organizing, and mobile system that the dancer's sense of self – especially in its agentive dimension[23] – co-produces itself together with the surrounding environment, which is primarily constituted by the intrusion of the teacher's voice. Through the evocation of continuously shifting elements, the Gaga teacher's voice 'inclines' and 'disposes' the dancer's body to introduce signifying stimuli that simultaneously trigger choreographic reconfigurations of

[21] The expression '4E cognition' (Gallagher 2023) refers to a set of contemporary approaches in cognitive science that conceptualize the mind as Embodied, Embedded, Enactive, and Extended. From this perspective, cognition is not an exclusively internal and representational process, but emerges from the dynamic interaction between body, environment, action, and artifacts. Thought is therefore grounded in embodied experience (embodied), situated in ecological and social contexts (embedded), co-constructed through action and perception (enactive), and often distributed beyond the boundaries of the biological body through external tools and devices (extended). These approaches challenge the classical separation between mind and world, proposing a view of rationality as a distributed and situated process, deeply intertwined with the sensorimotor and imaginative modalities of experience.

[22] In this contribution, the analysis focuses on the experiential and individual dimension of the dancer within Gaga practice. However, it is important to emphasize that Gaga is configured as a collective and shared form of movement, in which perceptual, attentional, and kinesthetic dynamics always emerge within a plural context that simultaneously involves multiple participants within the same field of action.

[23] In philosophical and cognitive science contexts the expression 'sense of agency' refers to the pre-reflective feeling of being the agent of one's own actions; that is, the lived experience of control and initiation with respect to one's movements and intentions. This notion, developed particularly in cognitive science and phenomenology of embodiment, does not coincide with an explicit or narrative awareness of the self, but rather with an immediate and embodied level of self-recognition of action-in-progress. The sense of agency thus emerges from the dynamic integration of motor, perceptual, and predictive processes, and can be modulated by the bodily, environmental, and relational conditions in which action unfolds (see Gallagher 2012).

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movement. A certain idea of 'materialist embodiment' generates a rich lexicon of images and metaphorical devices – funnels, pulleys and bellows, vital fluids, contact, affect, and passion – that attempt to account for the dynamism and processual nature of the living body, since the Gaga score is designed to capture the fluid character of the living body (see Vassileva 2016). Often, these semantic references introduced by the teacher are related to phenomena or elements with a strong thermoceptive component: 'lava,' 'magma,' 'boiling spaghetti.'

During Gaga training, skin and flesh are activated and explored in numerous creative ways: 'connecting to cutaneous sensitivity,' 'feeling the skin at a molecular level,' 'melting the flesh,' 'engaging the flesh to grasp the bones.' As David Howes (2018: 227) reminds us, thermoception depends on our largest sensory organ, the skin, itself a complex system that is 'both object and subject, enveloping and porous, visible and perceptible.' Far from being a static boundary, the skin constitutes a site of continuous exchange, in which inside and outside co-emerge in always partial ways, intrinsically open to constant renegotiation: a 'deep surface' (ibid.), traversed by forces that operate simultaneously from the inside out and from the outside in.[24] Thermoception, therefore, rarely concerns only the perceived qualities of an object or internal variations in temperature. Rather, it is an accumulation and exchange of energies, a constant flow between self and environment.[25] The sensation of heat is pervasive, diffuse, and often inseparable from other forms of exposure; it blurs the distinctions between self and environment:

> We learn to love our sweat, we discover our passion for movement and link it to exertion, we uncover the power of our imagination; we become more attentive and recognize the importance of energy and information flowing through our bodies in all directions; we discover the value of soft flesh and the sensitivity of the hands, we learn to connect to rhythm even in the absence of music; we remain aware of others in the room and realize that we are not the center of everything. We explore multidimensional movement, we take pleasure in the sensation of burning in our muscles, we become aware of our explosive power and at times we deploy it. (Vassileva 2016: 79)

[24] Traditionally conceived as a casing that separates an organic interior from an environmental exterior, the skin is instead described by an author such as Marjolein Oele (2018) in terms of an active, porous, and transformative threshold. The skin does not simply delimit the subject but constantly places it in relation with what it encounters. According to Oele, describing the skin in terms of an interface means emphasizing the creation of a site of encounter that cannot be reduced to a geometrically measurable space, whose agentive capacity is not exhausted in the outcome of mechanical interactions imposed by the components interfacing within it.

[25] In line with the proposals of Stacy Alaimo (2010), thermoception can be understood in 'transcorporeal' terms, that is, as a perceptual modality that traverses and destabilizes traditional boundaries between body and environment. From this perspective, bodily processes are not contained within an isolated subject, but are constituted through continuous exchanges of matter, energy, and environmental agents that inextricably bind the living being to its ecological context. Thermoception, as an experience of thermal flow and ongoing regulation between inside and outside, thus becomes a paradigmatic case of such interconnection, in which sensing is always already a being traversed by environmental forces.

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The verbal images proposed by the Gaga teacher do not function as simple descriptive instructions, but as devices for reorganizing experience, capable of activating sensorimotor schemas and fields of intensity that guide action. In this way, Gaga's performative narration operates as a continuous bridge between phenomenological and semiotic approaches to movement and gesture: drawing on personal memory, bodily sensations, and mental imagery occurring 'here and now,' and translating them into verbal expression.

In this framework, thermoception can be understood as an enactive semiotic variable insofar as it participates in the very constitution of the signifying field: it is not simply a perceived content, but an operator that modulates thresholds of relevance, orients bodily inferences, and contributes to the selection of available affordances. Gaga practice makes this process particularly visible because it establishes a tight circuit between metaphorical enunciation, sensory activation, and movement production, showing how meaning emerges from a continuous co-regulation between language and body. In this sense, Gaga offers a paradigmatic case in which thermoception ceases to function as a background physiological *datum* and instead becomes a proper semiotic parameter, capable of shaping the microgenesis of gesture and the situated construction of meaning. The 'cross-pollination' (Vassileva 2018) between words and movements thus constitutes the operative principle through which Gaga practice articulates language, perception, and action within a single dynamic field of sense production. Verbal images function as activation devices that continuously reorganize the body's readiness for action, modulating intensities, thresholds, and directions of movement. Temperature, in particular, emerges as a crucial dimension of this process: the sensation of muscular burning becomes a condition for accessing bodily mobility itself, enabling transitions from states of stillness to sudden kinetic explosions (jumps, extensions, or particularly daring poses). From this perspective, thermoception, along with the evocative metaphors of the Gaga teacher that constantly invoke it during improvisational practice, participates in a significant and original way in constructing the very possibilities and impossibilities of movement.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Conclusions

This article has examined the role of thermoception in dance improvisation from the perspective of enactive semiotics, arguing that thermal perception should be understood as an operative component of embodied meaning-making. Rather than functioning as a passive background of action, thermal perception participates in the continuous regulation of attention, the calibration of affordances, and the emergence of movement possibilities. From this perspective, thermoception contributes to orienting the dancer's exploratory in improvisational activity.

The analysis of Gaga practice shows how verbal instructions acquire their effectiveness because they reorganize the dancer's perceptual field and make specific sensorimotor configurations available for action. Thermoceptive awareness is therefore part of the regulatory processes through which bodily experience becomes semiotically productive. This suggests that the study of improvisation may benefit from a more systematic consideration of thermal perception alongside proprioception, kinaesthesia, and other modalities that have traditionally occupied a central place in embodied approaches to dance. Rather than simply constituting an additional sensory modality to be incorporated into existing models of embodied cognition, thermoception appears as one of the regulatory dimensions through which the field of affordances itself is continuously reorganized during improvisation. More generally, understanding thermoception as an enactive semiotic variable opens new avenues of analysing how bodily regulation and meaning production co-emerge within situated artistic practices, where perception does not merely accompany action but actively participates in its organization.

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Dance, body, and emotions:
Discussing ballet reform in 1600-1780

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BY: **Sergei Kruk**

To the memory of Vladimir Shklyarov,
the principal dancer of the Mariinsky Ballet

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ABSTRACT

The brain has several areas responsible for understanding the intentions and inner states of others through the nonverbal information conveyed by the body. This information is processed through either the rational cognitive pathway or the visceral perceptual pathway. For ballet spectators, the former leads to a propositional attitude and the latter to an intuitive emotional attitude toward the character. In the 17th and 18th centuries, intellectuals and professionals developed their ballet reform ideas in the framework of these two paradigms. All reformers advocated a narrative ballet that staged actions and emotions, but defended different forms of bodily motricity that can imitate real life. One group proposed imitating certain aspects of real motricity, describable as discrete signs and notated in the choreographic score. Another group favored holistic bodily expressions of emotional states resistant to any analytical description and notation; the dancer had to find the appropriate bodily signs of emotions by feeling into the role. Embracing differing viewpoints, the two principal ballet reformers, Jean-Georges Noverre and Gasparo Angiolini, were set against each other. Still, their ideas are perfectly compatible in narrative ballet and can be treated as elements of the nascent semiotics of ballet. The paper analyzes the evolution of these ideas for two centuries.

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Introduction

We can all understand the inner states of others by observing their bodies. Empirical neuroscience has identified two pathways for processing visual information about bodies in the brain (Kruk 2024). A cognitivist pathway involves the frontal lobe, which is responsible for the propositional representation of the body. The spectator can identify a gesture or movement and interpret it as a reflection of the character's inner state. Emotion may follow the cognitive evaluation of information. A perceptualist pathway involves subcortical areas, which processes information at a visceral level as feelings. The dancer's bodily signs evoke a feeling that the spectator experiences as a simulation of the inner state of the other and develops an emotional attitude for the character. Perceptual representations of holistic bodily signs are difficult to verbalize in a rational manner (Kruk 2022). The cognitive paradigm dominant in ballet studies only recognizes discrete signs of motricity and their analytical interpretations, thereby relegating this visceral emotional experience to the background (cf. Martin 1939; Langer 1957; Hanna 1979; McFee 1992, 2011). In the 17th and 18th centuries, scholars and professionals discussed ballet reform in the framework of both paradigms, but the inability to distinguish between them led to misunderstandings and conflicts that culminated in an exchange of acrimonious comments between Gasparo Angiolini (1731-1803) and Jean-Georges Noverre (1727-1810).

This article analyzes the conceptions of body language and the expression of emotions in theater and ballet as they appear in works published in the 17th and 18th centuries, primarily in France, but also in Italy, England, Germany, and the Netherlands. The use of neuroscience as an analytical framework is justified for two reasons. First, by explaining the connection between visceral feelings and emotions, it acknowledges the validity of the subjective and poetic reasoning of ballet reformers who, like Noverre, were unable to express their thoughts in logical language. Second, the outlines of a theory of emotion that were developed during this period anticipated modern neuroscience. The influence of these theoretical considerations can also be found in the works of ballet reformers. To highlight the evolution of the reformers' ideas, their publications are examined chronologically. The terms 'passion,' 'sentiment, and 'emotion,' while possessing different connotations, are used interchangeably to refer to inner states and their bodily expressions.

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1. In the beginning was the word

Reading the remarks of Hypolyte-Julius Pilet de la Mesnardière (1639: 235-254) on theater, it can be assumed that, at that time, actors merely recited the text and were unable to use their bodies to represent the characters. Playwrights do not know human behavior in different situations or do not have the ability to describe the diversity of emotions experienced by individuals under different circumstances, Mesnardière wrote. He does not formulate universal rules for writers and actors because it is impossible to describe all the real situations that could be represented on stage. Mesnardière merely suggests that dramatists rely on their own observations to imitate the movements of people of different social groups and professions and to represent behaviors specific to a particular inner state. François Hédelin d'Aubignac gave his work the ambitious title *La pratique du théâtre*, but in it, he only instructed playwrights about the discursive representation of passions (1657: 426-444). He did not consider the actor's body language to be a sufficient means of expression.

Body and emotions were frowned upon in Western civilization. For ancient philosophers, the moral ideal was in the ability to control your impulses and desires through the exercise of reason. Self-control and moderation prevailed in aesthetics. Plato criticized poets, actors, and spectators who identified with vicious characters whose sentiments they sought to express and who took pleasure in the gestures or melodies of wickedness because, by imitating them, they contracted those same vices (1993: 396a-397e; 2015: 656a-b). Aristotle had a more positive opinion about emotional bodies. He did not separate the body from the soul and maintained that the body expresses the affections of the soul. Therefore, affections do not constitute a purely bodily function; they also have a cognitive component (2011: 403a16-34). The imitation of vicious passions, particularly in the theater, can have a positive cathartic effect, as it allows spectators to free themselves from their harmful inclinations. In the 17th century, scientists rediscovered the Aristotelian paradigm, and artists and dancers strove to reintroduce emotional acting to the stage.

2. Body and emotion rediscovered

It is no exaggeration to say that the pursuit of emotion in the arts and sciences was the spirit of the 17th century. 'Hereby we may conclude that passions well used, may consist with wisdom against the Stoics; and if they be moderated, to be very serviceable to virtue,' wrote the English Jesuit Thomas Wright[1] (1601: 18) in the opening pages of his treatise on the passions. The French theologian Nicolas Coeffeteau outlined a theory

[1] All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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of adaptive function of emotions. Negative passions are essential because, without delay, they signal the danger of the present situation: 'The movements of the passions override reason and precede all human deliberations' (1620: 67). Passions leave their mark on the body so that even the fiercest adversaries of passions pale in the face of danger is how Coeffeteau describes the function of what we know as the autonomic nervous system. Being natural reactions to the environment, passions are independent of virtues: 'giving us a man who is not moved by any passion is truly to strip him of his humanity and make him a rock or a god' (1620: 63). Coeffeteau rejects mind-body dualism, which offers a simplified image of reason and sensuality.

Marin Cureau de la Chambre further developed this paradigm. The soul expresses its spiritual qualities externally, so the body becomes a natural sign of inner states by which people can be known. Bodily alterations are the effects of passions. All parts of the body participate in the expression of emotions: face, gait, hand gestures, and posture. The entire body expresses air, grace, and demeanor. Body language is holistic and it is problematic to describe it as composed of discrete units.

> It is much more difficult to say what *bodily characteristics* consist of… It is clear that every passion brings a certain *je ne sais quel* air to the face; that virtue makes a certain grace and a pleasing demeanor flow in its actions, which is not found in vices. However, since it has always been called the *je ne sais quoi*, it seems that the intention has also been to teach that you cannot say what it is. (1640: 7)

By locating the soul in the pineal gland, René Descartes (1637, 1649) severed its direct link with the sensitive body. For Coeffeteau, passions illuminate reason about the external world, while for Descartes, they are detached from it. Passions are confused ideas, provoked, reinforced, and sustained by the movement of animal spirits originating from primitive emotions: wonder, love, hate, desire, joy, and sadness. Due to the nerves connecting the soul to the body, passions are externalized as natural movements, but they are devoid of informational value since they can be imitated by both machines and animals. Independent of thought, passions exclusively belong to the body, and their nonverbal expressions are inferior to speech. Strong men must tame the passions and master the bodily movements that accompany them.

Cureau de la Chambre (1664) opposed Descartes, arguing, following Aristotle, that the soul resides in different parts of the body. Some produce bodily movements, while others are detached from matter and perform intellectual operations. This means that the soul receives information from the environment and externalizes passions, which the observer can perceive as a reflection of inner states.

The physicist and mathematician Marin Mersenne claimed to provide a scientific basis for the Platonic ideal of dance. In a book *Des Chants*, he formulated the purport of *ballet de cour*.

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> The perfection of the body consists in perfect health and in its prompt obedience to the spirit it serves; therefore, dances that bestow these qualities upon it should be considered the most perfect of all possibilities. Health-enhancing walks are also part of these dances, so that you can compare all the exercises of human life to a ballet, which consists of all kinds of movements and positions. (Mersenne 1636: 159)

Ballet reformers, in turn, drew inspiration from Aristotle. Guillaume Colletet envisaged dance as a means of expression of actions and emotions. The formal *ballet de cour* reflected the Platonic idea of the representation of world order through 'measured and perfectly coordinated dances,' Colletet observed and contrasted it with the Aristotelian ideal that: 'dance is a living image of our actions and an artificial expression of our secret thoughts'; for spectators, ballet is 'like a pleasant Panacea that an ancient poet derives from the head of Apollo to heal all the wounds that melancholy brings forth in souls' (1632: 3, 4, 6).

In an instruction on *ballet de cour*, Saint-Hubert (1641) was already thinking about dramatic action. Dancers should not dance uniformly but rather choose the typical steps of the characters they represent; their actions on the stage must enable the audience to understand the story. The idea of narrative ballet was gaining popularity in France under the influence of Italian opera of the 1640s (Paquot 1957), the aims of which were more in line with the Aristotelian paradigm. 'Dance is an active metaphor that signifies, through gesture and movement, inner affections or outward human actions,' Emanuele Tesauro (1654: 488) reiterated in his interpretation of Aristotle. The Jesuit priest and choreographer Claude-François Ménestrier corrected Tesauro: Ballet simultaneously expresses inner states and outward actions. 'Passion must be mingled with action as much as possible in the same *entrée* to make it more pleasing' (1658: 54). This is a strong argument in support of the future *ballet d'action*. Later, however, Noverre and Angiolini would separate the expression of emotions from that of actions, each addressing one or the other of these aspects of dance. For Ménestrier, the expression of passions constituted the crowning achievement of art, 'for you must know their nature perfectly, and since they possess inner principles of which we see only the effects, it is difficult to express them'(1658: 53). However, dancers do not directly imitate passions and inner states. They interpret them by involving every part of their body.

In 1662, Louis XIV created the Royal Academy of Dance with the mission of preserving ballet from the irreparable ruin that ignorant and incompetent people could bring about. He recognized that, for the ancients, the movements of the body expressed the secret sentiments of the soul and that contemporary dance could reveal the nature, condition, state, and passion of the people it represented (Louis XIV 1663: 39, 45). The royal decision contributed to the development of the concept of emotional expressiveness in dance.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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3. Plutarch's Table Talk on dance

In 1665, Plutarch's *W* was printed in French. This translation by Jacques Amyot had already appeared in 1572, but only the second edition attracted the attention of ballet specialists. In the last dialogue, the Greek philosophers had a brief but fruitful exchange of ideas about dance. Michel de Pure (1668) and his followers relied on their authority to support the ballet reform, but errors in translation and a misunderstanding of the Greek terms prevented a coherent and convincing semiotics of ballet.[2] The polysemy of the terms used by Plutarch does not allow for a precise interpretation of his nomenclature of dance movements, and it is doubtful that it was a comprehensive conception of ancient dance (Lawler 1954). My interest is not in semiotics of ancient dance, but rather in the appropriation of Greek discourse for the purpose of reforming ballet. In the following summary of the talk, I rely on Plutarch's explicit descriptions and examples of dance motricity in their translations into Latin, French, Italian, and English (Plutarchus 1570; Plutarque 1572; Plutarco 1598; Plutarch 1657, 1694).

In the ninth book of *Table Talk* (747a–748b), the philosopher Ammonius, the protagonist of Plutarch's work, identified three basic elements of dance. Φορά refers to movement itself, the motricity. The movement ends in σχῆμα, which is the static pose, as an iconographic representation of the character. Unlike σχῆμα, δεῖξις does not mimic objects. It designates them directly or by convention, which may also originate from poetry.[3]

Incidentally, Plutarch wrote that motricity, φορά, can be ἐμφαντικόν, that is, expressive of actions and inner states: πρᾶξις, πάθος, and δύναμις.[4] Plutarch does not explain these terms and provides no examples. To make sense of the terminology, I rely on the dictionary of ancient Greek (LSJ 2013-2026) and the personal experience of ballet as a spectator. Dancers mimic some aspect of motricity that is typical of professions, social groups, bodily states (e.g., sleep and drunkenness), and animal behaviors. Such imitations of real-life motricity constitute πρᾶξις – actions, manner of acting, practices, and behaviors. The bodies reveal the inner states of their characters, which spectators

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[2] The English choreographer John Weaver was perhaps the most fervent professional to draw inspiration from ancient texts. He stated unequivocally that restoring imitation through pantomime would improve contemporary ballet (1728:2).

[3] Plutarch cites these verses as material for visualization in dance: 'Revered Themis and quick-glancing Aphrodite, And Hera golden-wreathed and beautiful Dione.' Poetic metaphors denote the characteristics of mythical figures: reverence, vigilance, pride, and beauty. Choreographers and dancers can find concrete movements to visualize these metaphorical characteristics. Variations in classical ballet offer many examples. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the Diamond Fairy beats her legs together in midair and sharply raises her palms with the fingers spread out. Just as in how educated readers of poetry can decipher metaphors, experienced ballet goers with vivid imagination can interpret these movements as indicative of scintillating light of sparkling facets of a diamond. Therefore, the δεῖξις are indices and symbols rather than icons as the σχῆμα. Plutarch does not insist that these signs must be static like the σχῆμα.

[4] I will maintain this classification, as I consider it related to Peirce's categories of Thirdness, Secondness, and Firstness, respectively. This question deserves to be explored further in another article.

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then cognize as motifs and intentions or feel viscerally as emotions (Kruk 2022). This is πάθος – affection and passion. Every movement can be executed differently by applying more or less power. This is δύναμις – strength, power, and the ability to do anything. In Latin, Guilielmus Xylander translated this term as *facultas* (Plutarchus 1570: 749), which means capability, possibility, power, means, opportunity, skill, and the ability to do anything easily (Lewis and Short 1956: 718). The Italian translator Antonio Gandino (Plutarco 1598: 280) highlighted similar connotations by using the word *arte* – the ability to execute and apply a method to achieve a goal (TLIO 1997-2025). The same logic underlies John Weaver's (1712) classification of motricity, distinguishing between brisk and grave movements. The variation in execution is due to the address of the body. At that time, the English 'address' had a similar connotation as the Italian *arte*: dexterous carriage in the management of a business (Kersey 1708). Noverre maintains that motricity can vary along three dimensions: acute/grave, slow/prompt, and light/strong (1807: 137). Rudolf Laban (1948) conceives of four: free/bound (flow), sustained/sudden (time), light/strong (weight), and indirect/direct (space). Their combination constitutes the Effort, which can be considered as an expanded version of δύναμις.

4. De Pure and Ménestrier call for reform

In the 17th and 18th centuries, authors neglected these three aspects of motricity, which, I would argue, capture the essence of their reformist ideas. Even if they did not refer to Plutarch, all of them insisted that dance movements should be expressive of (ἐμφαντικόν) real life. Some emphasized behaviors (πρᾶξις), while others focused on emotions (πάθος) and still others evoked both of those without distinction. Almost all of them encouraged dancers to add a personal touch to standard movements of ballet – δύναμις would be an appropriate term for this aspect of dance. Instead, they sought to squeeze this elegant triad into the inappropriate framework of σχῆμα and δεῖξις.

De Pure explains the σχῆμα as 'the grace and beauty of dance' (1668: 281), which is more in line with the Platonic definition of dance as the objectification of the harmony of the world. De Pure also misunderstood the δεῖξις. Plutarch's examples suggest that these are gestures and movements by which the dancer points at a thing or displays some characteristics of the embodied person. The dictionary mentions several pertinent connotations of δεῖξις: display, exhibition, calling up, and reference (LSJ 2013-2026). Amyot translated it in French as la montre. The noun derives from the verb *montrer* – to show, to point out (*L'Académie française* 1694: 83). However, Amyot then specified the meaning by two more words: *indication* and *démonstration*. While the first respects the purport of δεῖξις, the latter adds a new connotation: mark, testimony of an inner state or intention such as friendship, malice, anger, resentment,

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

sadness, etc. (*L'Académie française* 1694: 84). De Pure established *démonstration* as the principal feature of ballet, as opposed to simple ballroom dancing. *Démonstration* allows ballet dancers to express, paint, and bring before our eyes the things they intend to convey through dance. It allows them to show something more than mere movements: vigor, strength, liveliness, lightness, and temperament. This 'something' is a faithful imitation of the character's motricity.

Arguably, de Pure substituted ἐμφαντικόν for *démonstration*. It was not a serious error for the nascent narrative ballet, but the terminological eclecticism generated some confusion in the conceptualization of the new genre and a semiotics of ballet for decades afterward. De Pure discussed the expression of emotions and actions in another chapter, *Du Pas de ballet* (1668: 243–251), which was inspired by Cureau de la Chambre more than by Plutarch. Emotional expression is 'based on natural movements that flow from the body according to the disturbances and various agitations of the soul,' and the body 'signifies, despite ourselves, the inner movements that we try to hide and keep secret' (1668: 250). Motricity can represent professions and social ranks. Without these expressions, 'the step is nothing but a convulsion of master and dancer, a senseless and aimless oddity, and ultimately a defective dance, made up of perilous leaps that signify nothing and have no more meaning than the one who created and invented them' (1668: 251). De Pure was convinced of the communicative potential of nonverbal signs. Ballet is a silent spectacle where gestures and movements signify what could be expressed by words, and spectators can understand body language without a program. If something cannot be shown by movement, it is not the subject of ballet. To find the appropriate bodily expressions, the dancer must understand the role and the character of his persona.

The contemporary stage was far from the testimonies found in Greek books (cf. Vossius 1673: 135), but a vivid description of the sarabande (Pomey 1676: 22) proves that at least some dancers conveyed emotions on stage, and the spectators perceived them. Storytelling and emotions were becoming the essential criteria to evaluate ballet. Simple dance did not express anything, while ballet expressed actions, habits, and passions, Ménestrier (1682) reiterated. Like de Pure, he misinterpreted the term σχῆμα, translating it as *figures*. For de Pure, the *figures* were poses and movements, whereas Ménestrier referred to the spatiotemporal coordination of the dancers. He used the word *démonstrations* for δεῖξις and respected Plutarch's definition of the term, but the hectic explanation that followed confused the terminology. *Figures* and examples of expressive dance became *démonstrations*. Like de Pure, Ménestrier considered δεῖξις to be the principal criterion that distinguishes ballet from simple dance. He then modified the terminology once again, arguing that the basic elements of ballet are *portements de corps*, *représentations*, and *gestes pour l'imitation*, but the examples of dancers' movements mentioned correspond to the category of πρᾶξις (1682: 167).

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Like de Pure, Ménestrier devoted a separate chapter to passions and actions, which he called les expressions. He attributed the notion to Aristotle, although, in a chapter devoted to Plutarch, he referred to similar movements as *démonstrations*. In any case, the terms πρᾶξις and πάθος more accurately describe two types of *expressions.* Actual actions are represented on stage by their kinetic features; passions are 'imitations based on the impressions which the soul naturally leaves on the body and on the judgment of the customs and inclinations of people on the basis of these exterior movements' (1682: 160; trans. 2018: 541). The imitation of passions is more difficult because it is a complex set of movements of body parts. Their convincing coordination is a crowning achievement of the art, 'because one needs to know their nature perfectly in order to express them well' (1682: 161; trans. 2018: 542). Music facilitates motor coordination: simultaneously producing movements in the soul and in the body, and it harmonizes both.

The terms πάθος, πρᾶξις, and δύναμις allow us to clearly distinguish the different aspects of movement that de Pure and Ménestrier considered essential to ballet. However, their reading of Plutarch only served to confuse the nascent semiotics of ballet. For example, Ménestrier argued that simple dance was limited to body movements, while ballet necessarily required *démonstrations.* He made an exception for the sarabande, which could be danced in the Spanish style with expression (1682: 159; trans. 2018: 537). Plutarch, for his part, asserted that any dance motricity can be expressive of (ἐμφαντικόν) emotions.

5. A cognitivist turn

In France, the political and artistic climate changed in the 1680s, with conservatives strengthening their hold on the court of Louis XIV (Becq 1984). Emotions are now under suspicion again. In special literature, a technical description of nonverbal expressions as discrete codes proliferated. Encouraged by Cureau de la Chambre's statement that portraits can show the person's air (1640: 9), the painter Charles le Brun gave a series of lectures in 1668, explaining the drawing of emotional faces. His illustrated instructions for painters were published posthumously in 1698. A kind of dictionary of body language compiled by Giovanni Bonifaccio was published in Italian already in 1616. Andrea Perrucci (1699: 110-143) followed this example, giving dramatic actors advice on the use of gestures, facial expressions, and gait as codes for sociodemographic characteristics, everyday behaviors, somatic states, and theatrical conventions. Jean-Léonor Grimarest, a French polygraph author, harshly criticized actors for their inability to use gestures, but lacked Perrucci's professional stage acting experience to resolve this issue. He only taught actors the vocal expression of emotions (1707: 119-192).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

Regarding dance literature, Raoul Auger Feuillet (1700) and Pierre Rameau (1725) developed classifications of body postures and movements. The Neapolitan choreographer Giovanni Battista Dufort (1728) wrote a similar work for amateurs wishing to improve their performances at public balls. No one addressed passions and actions. Gabriel Le Jay argued that dramatic dance should imitate reality to arouse admiration and pleasure (1727: 515) – note that this is not about conveying emotions. Through body movements and gestures, dancers show the things, demonstrate, and imitate manners and affections so that the spectator can understand the silent performer, Le Jay continues. As an example, he mentioned imitations of real-life actions such as this characteristic of country people: They 'strike the ground with a heavy, slow step, and use crude and clumsy movements, fruits of the country's lack of sophistication' (1727: 534). This is what happiness looks like on stage: 'The dancer must be quick and agile, propelling his feet with repeated jumps so that he seems to barely touch the ground, snapping his fingers, and jumping lightly with his whole body' (1727: 534). Fifty years earlier, Ménestrier was not concerned with such discrete codes but encouraged dancers to imagine the inner state of a person in love and to fully experience it during the performance: 'Love requires enthusiasm and tenderness, a gentle and serene face, which nevertheless clouds over occasionally and which takes on as many forms as there are movements of the heart that can disturb it' (1682: 161; trans. 2018: 542).

6. At the crossroads of cognitivism and perceptualism

In his manual for actors published in London, Charles Gildon (1710) devoted several pages to ballet. He asserted that the movements of the body parts had certain natural meanings, they arouse emotions and impress the mind stronger than words. Actors must adapt their movements and facial expressions to the subject of the story and the emotion that the character being portrayed is to feel. The English dancer and choreographer John Weaver had the same opinion. Motion of all parts of the body creates positions, gestures, and movements which represent passions, manners, and actions so that in a skillful representation of any character the spectator can understand the subject of the story and distinguish passions[5] (1712: 160-161).

The purpose of Pierre Jean Burette's (1717) research on the history of ancient dance was the rehabilitation of emotional dance. Dance imitates various actions and passions through gestures, postures, movements, and facial expressions. In antiquity, pantomime actors used their bodies to reveal the deepest thoughts and feelings of the soul.

[6] SWeaver (1728) claimed to have composed the first narrative ballet in 1702; a 14-year hiatus ensued before regular production began. The program (Weaver 1718) suggests that the narration was achieved through a gradual development of events, but there is no description of scenes revealing the emotions, the inner states of the characters as Noverre would do 40 years later.

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The representation of passions plays a positive role in society, as it awakens feelings of piety, compassion, courage, and generosity in the spectators. Burette concluded that dance can be as instructive as it is enjoyable.

A proponent of John Locke's sensualism, Jean-Baptiste Dubos strove to rehabilitate the human faculty of the senses. Passions provide both pleasure and pain; but people fear the boredom that follows inaction even more, 'and they find in the activities of life and in the intoxication of the passions an excitement that keeps them occupied… Thus, by instinct, we run after the objects that can excite our passions' (1719: 9-10, 11; trans. 2021: 98). He distinguished real passions from their artistic imitations. Artists present imitations of objects that can excite true passions, but, however strong they are, imitation is incapable of causing real pain and real affliction. Even if an artist happens to create a positive representation of vice, the fault must be attributed to their dishonesty or ignorance rather than to art.

Augustine's distinction between artificial and natural signs has shed light on the communication of passions. Spoken words are arbitrary signs instituted by society, and their meaning must be learned. Natural signs are instituted by nature itself to signify passions. They indicate surprise, joy, and pain, and they are similar in different cultures. By using natural signs, painting puts nature before our eyes. Dubos does not hide his interest in visual communication. 'Instinct, reinforced by experience, gives the soul more trust in sight than in the other senses. The soul checks the reports of other senses against the sense of sight when the soul suspects that these reports are inaccurate' (1719: 375; trans. 2021: 297). However, Dubos does not recognize ballet as a medium of visual communication capable of conveying emotions. He reduced natural signs to gestures and mimics, but even manual gestures seemed imperfect to him because their meaning depend on context. Dubos tended to perceive nonverbal signs as simply accompanying speech. Only affects, such as a headache, have unambiguous natural signs.

Dubos underestimated the expressive potential of the entire body. He considered bodily signs as *démonstrations*, without, however, defining the term or providing examples. The word appeared most often in the enumerations next to 'gesture.' In this expression, it designates body language in general: 'steps, bodily attitudes, gestures, and, in short, all the *démonstrations* [translated in English as 'actions'[6]] that ordinarily accompany the speaking part, or which sometimes help them make their sentiments known without speaking' (1719: 507; trans. 2021: 737). Dubos did not address the communication of emotions in ballet. This was probably not his objective. The point is that he considered the translation of the Greek word ὄρχησις and the Latin *saltatio* as

[6] English translators missed the meaning of the term altogether: for them, *démonstrations* are 'actions' (Dubos 2021:737), 'body language' (742), 'demonstrations' (742), 'signs' (752, 770), 'movements' (751, 752, 753, 771), 'eye-catching gestures' (772), or 'motions' (772).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

'dance' to be erroneous. The ancients did not dance; they merely imitated behaviors through gestures and movements; their 'dance' might have been limited to the recitation of a poem. This is why contemporary ballet can learn nothing from the past, not even the expression of emotions (1719: 506–508). Not surprisingly, Dubos was rather pleased with the *ballet de cour* of his time.

An inconsistent approach to emotions is a characteristic of Jacques Bonnet (1723). This is clear in his presentation of the Greek nomenclature of ballet *movements*. In fact, this text is not even his own: He plagiarized the chapter Les Mouvements of Ménestrier's book, making a few modifications regarding emotions (cf. Bonnet 1723: 58ff with Ménestrier 1682: 153ff). Ménestrier introduced his chapter by asserting that the imitation of things and actions, affections, and customs, is essential to ballet (1682: 153). Bonnet in the first lines recalled, following Plato, that dance was a means of cultivating morality (1723: 58). He omitted Ménestrier's reference to Aristotle on the importance of emotions. However, he did retain a reference to Theophrastus, who maintained that imitation of vices produced no harmful effects. Elsewhere, Bonnet asserted that emotional states could be communicated through nonverbal expressions, without, however, conceptualizing them. Bonnet cited these examples of body movements, which Ménestrier mentioned as expressions of inner states, alongside imitations of the kinetic properties of actions. Bonnet relegated a more in-depth discussion of emotions to the final chapter, *Parallèle de la peinture et de la poésie*, devoted to Le Brun's lectures. Even a static pose of a sitter can express all the passions of the soul, Bonnet emphasized. If reasoning consists of inferring one thing from the knowledge of another, this is also possible in painting. From the poses and expressions represented in the painting, the viewer can infer the inner state of the people depicted. Only one step remained to reveal the emotional potential of the dancers' bodies, but Bonnet did not take it.

Franz Lang (1727), a German playwright, also developed technical instructions for actors. He advocated a cognitive conception of emotions: actions must be observed, reflected upon, and mentally constructed before being assimilated by the actor's body and voice. The bodily expression of emotions is natural, but in the theater, it must be cultivated to better communicate meaning. From these natural expressions, Lang sought to distinguish combinations of discrete signs from all parts of the body, which would then indicate various inner states.

In contrast, the playwright and actor of the Italian theatre in Paris, Luigi Riccoboni (1728), was a perceptualist. To achieve fidelity on stage, the actor must follow his instinct, forget his limbs and head, and strive instead to feel the thing being represented, to make the audience believe that the hero's concerns are their own. Then, the body will act spontaneously. No one will criticize the actor who guides their actions with their heart, Riccoboni assured his readers.

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7. Perceptualists win the readers' minds

In the mid-17th century, book dealers offered many scholarly works on the communicative potential of the body. The physician and philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1745) formulated a theory of emotions within the paradigm established by Aristotle, Coeffeteau, and Cureau de la Chambre. La Mettrie conceived emotions to be a mechanism that maintains the balance between the organism and its environment. What we now call the autonomic nervous system ensures interaction with the environment by transmitting responses to external stimuli, thereby modifying the somatic state. Blushing, blanching, increased breathing, etc. are the bodily signs that are the reactions to a change in the environment. We do not know the causes that trigger passions in others, but we can explain them as we observe the body, La Mettrie contends.

The perceptual theory of emotions received support from the philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac who rejected the Cartesian primacy of discourse. Condillac distinguished between three types of signs (Condillac 1746: 65; trans. 1947: 19):

1. Accidental signs or objects linked with some ideas in some circumstances;
2. Natural signs of feelings of joy, fear, pain, etc.;
3. Institutional signs arbitrarily related to the ideas.

It is tempting to interpret accidental signs as imitations of real-life behaviors and institutional signs as gestures specific to cultural codes. However, since Condillac did not write about ballet, I will not dwell on it here. Natural signs are more interesting for us because they explain the communication of emotions. These are the automatic effects of specific desires upon our bodies. Being similar in all human beings, desires produce similar sentiments and bodily expressions, which, in turn, cause others to feel something similar. Bodily expressions were the first signs that enabled the communication of thoughts. Speech succeeded the language of action that Condillac called the 'dance of gestures.' Furthermore, dance as such, the 'dance of steps,' originated in these movements. It served to express certain states of the soul, especially joy. Bodily expressions that are natural signs are more ardent than discourse and consist of institutionalized signs because the former are direct products of imagination that had not been weakened by artificial signs yet. 'Indeed, for those familiar with it, a single gesture often amounts to a long sentence' (1746: 78-79; trans. 2001: 141).

In 1723, Jacques Bonnet began his reflection on ballet by formulating the educational objectives of dance; twenty years after him, the philosopher Charles Batteaux asserted that 'the aim of the arts is to move the soul' (1746: 255). Like Dubos, Batteux distinguished between institutionalized and natural signs. The former are words; the latter are tone of voice and gestures (body movements and postures) that refer to the inward operations of the mind. Both types of signs lend themselves to

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

the communication of ideas and emotions. Unlike Dubos, Batteaux had much more confidence in the communicative potential of nonverbal language. Tone and gesture occur more naturally and express more than verbal language, they 'go straight to the heart, without any detours' (1746: 254). Therefore, the primary objective of music and dance should be the imitation of passions. There is no necessity to translate passions into propositions, since the heart possesses its own intelligence, independent of words. Given the difference between institutionalized and natural signs, Batteux distinguished the functions of actions and passions in theater and ballet. In poetry, passions prepare and produce action. In dance, action is a kind of framework that is designed to carry, support, arouse, and connect various passions.

Regarding the actor's work on stage, Batteux aligns with Lang. Stage passions are artificial because their bodily expressions are merely signs. Art does not create expressions; it only regulates, reinforces, and polishes them as signs. In real life, gestures are regulated by instinct, but dancers must not live through the sentiments that they express because they must respect artistic rules, adapting their expressions to musical rhythm, movement, melody, and harmony. Batteux left a question unanswered: How can actors isolate an instinctive expression of a passion as a distinct natural sign and 'polish' it, still not making it an institutionalized sign?

The playwright Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine, in his turn, is a devoted perceptualist. Facial expressions, gestures, postures, and body movements must accompany the sentiments, giving an impression of truthfulness, he explained in a manual for actors, *Le Comédien* (1749: 139). Sainte-Albine preserved Batteaux's distinction between natural emotions and artistic representations: 'Nature must first sketch the actor. Art must then complete their training' (1749: 16). However, contrary to Batteaux's advice, actors must be capable of experiencing different passions in their souls if they want to be convincing on stage. Sainte-Albine was categorical on this matter: 'If you cannot lend yourself to these metamorphoses, do not venture onto the stage' (1749: 33).

Clearly, Antoine-François Riccoboni emphasized the importance of body language by declaring in the opening pages of his manual: 'I will begin by talking about gestures, and this may seem strange to you' (1750: 4). However, unlike his father (Riccoboni 1728) and Sainte-Albine, he sided with Batteaux's cognitivism. The goal of nonverbal communication is to convey emotion to the audience. To do this, the actor must know the natural expressions of others and imitate them harmoniously using all the parts of their body, not just their arms: 'Voilà le grand art' (1750: 41). Actors must develop a mechanical habit of appearing in an emotional state, but they must not be genuinely affected by the emotion they are portraying.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had promised to translate Sainte-Albine's *Le Comédien* into German, but, finding only 'empty words for concepts' instead of 'a system of rules' in the book, he abandoned the project (1754: 265). He reiterated Lang and

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Batteux. In real life, the body spontaneously expresses the inner constitution of the soul, but in the theater, the audience wants to see emotions expressed in the most perfect way. To achieve perfection, the actor must first learn bodily expressions, then imitate the external marks of an emotion, and 'then his soul, by the impression made on it by the senses, will automatically place itself in a position that will allow its movements to be expressed according to gestures, positions, and intonations' (1754: 209-210). It is a mechanical learning process, Lessing concedes, but it is based on immutable rules.

The English painter William Hogarth (1753) adopted a middle ground. He argued that action could 'perhaps' be learned through some type of 'grammar rules.' Kinesis is one example: each character possesses particular lines of movement. For example, barbarian dances consist of 'wild skipping, jumping, and turning round, or running backward and forward, with convulsive shrugs, and distorted gestures' (1753: 150). Knowing the general principles of kinesis, the actor can reinforce, modify, and adjust the movements of the real life that they intend to imitate on stage. However, actions intended to enforce the sentiments or raise the passions 'must be left entirely to the judgement of the performer' (1753: 151).

In France, the idea that natural signs convey genuine emotions became a criterion of theatrical performance. Denis Diderot placed such importance on nonverbal communication that he used earplugs in the theater: 'To judge gestures and movements fairly, one must consider the actor, without listening to the words' (1751: 64-65). However, the terms 'passion' or 'sentiment' did not appear among the keywords that define ballet in the *Encyclopédie*. Louis de Cahusac, the author of the entry "Ballet," wrote a technical definition: the representation of an action through gestures, steps, and body movements; a kind of mute poetry that speaks without saying anything (1751: 42-46). Still, he criticized the authors of *L'Europe galante* – an innovative narrative spectacle in the new opera-ballet genre – for ignoring the expressive potential of the dancers' bodies. Cahusac lamented that dances were not linked to the narrative by specific actions and that the different nations were represented by uniform steps rather than by movements specific to their culture.

Three years later, Cahusac wrote a much more scathing critique of contemporary ballet. He categorically opposed Dubos, whose arguments rested on 'the supposed perfection of the dance of his time' (1754, vol.1: xviii). Cahusac called for a renewal of ballet through imitation of nature. Condillac's theory reinforced the conviction of the communicative potential of nonverbal language. 'The word is not more expressive than the gesture' (1754, vol.1: 135). The gesture is even more precise than speech, 'several words are necessary to express a thought; a single movement can paint several thoughts and sometimes the most intense situation' (1754, vol.1: 150). The various affections of the soul are the origin of gestures. All parts of the body must be involved

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12**:01:2026
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in the portrayal of emotions. Their coordination solely depends on the mind. Dancers must study people and their passions in depth, be able to perceive with great precision the nuances that distinguish passions, and to know how they are reflected in the body. Unfortunately, dancers and composers know only the technical aspect of ballet. Therefore, a theory of the artistic aspect is needed, and it is possible indeed because the steps and postures are 'the letters and words of ballet,' Cahusac maintained (1754, vol.1: xxxix). Dancers, in turn, must learn the discovered rules that Cahusac promised to formulate: 'Nature provided the positions, while experience provided the rules' (1754, vol.1: 17). Up to this point, in the first volume, Cahusac had shown himself to be a cognitivist; in the third, he abandoned his attempt to cognize the 'letters and words' of ballet and turned toward perceptualism. From its origins, dance has served as an expression of the affections of the soul, and it must express, represent, and capture them, Cahusac contended (1754, vol.3: 114-115). How should dancers use their bodies to express, represent, and capture? Cahusac offers no answer. The rule he formulates is as simple as it is abstract:

> Nature must be the guide of art in all things, and art must seek to imitate nature in all things. Moreover, it is always up to talent alone to bring to fruition in practice what the precepts of theory can only outline. (1754, vol.3: 166)

The choreographer and dance master are absolved of all responsibility, since the dancer alone is the creator of the role.

> Accustom your soul to feeling, and your gestures will soon harmonize with its expression. Then, immerse yourself, to the point of enthusiasm, in the subject you are to represent. Your overflowing imagination will bring to life diverse situations in striking images. Draw them yourself, following your imagination: We assure you in advance that they will be an imitation of the beauty of nature. (1754, vol.3: 168)

For the Encyclopedists, a lack of analytical precision was not a flaw in art criticism. On the contrary, Jean-Le Rond d'Alambert (1751) warned against the overuse of rigid analytical reasoning on sentiment. The logic of passion is entirely different from ordinary logic, and it is impossible to analyze sentiments precisely, he explained. Diderot even claimed that detailed rules could not help actors express their passions: 'there is something else, more immediate, intimate, obscure, and certain, which guides and enlightens them [artists]' (1757: 104-105). Jean-Georges Noverre approached ballet reform from this intellectual perspective, while his critics saw it as a serious shortcoming and strove to develop an analytical approach.

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8. Complementary antagonists Noverre and Angiolini

Noverre, drawing on Batteaux, offered an elegant explanation of the difference between theater and ballet. Theater relies on verbal communication, which allows cold, calculating reasoning. Ballet is nonverbal communication; bodies cannot reason, but they can convey emotions. Therefore, the classical rules of theater are not applicable to ballet, its purpose being to express passions and sentiments powerfully (Noverre 1772: 6). Emotions have somatic expressions.

> Gesture is the countenance of the soul, its effect must be immediate and cannot fail to achieve its aim when it is true… The passions are the springs which actuate the machine; whatever movements result from it, they cannot fail to be expressive. (1760: 265-266, trans. 1966: 100)

Even if emotions are biological processes, their theatrical expression is not so simple. Observable bodily signs are complex; it is not easy to identify the most important element of expression that would perfectly represent a particular emotion. In drama, it is the choice of words, the prosody that allows emotions to be differentiated. How can you find the right bodily sign to faithfully express emotion in ballet? That is the task of the dancers. To find the right expression, they must feel into the role: Study the character of the figures portrayed and put themselves in their place. Verbal instructions are of little use for dancers. 'A man of intelligence will draw excellent programs and furnish a painter with the most noble ideas [a story], but the merit lies in distribution and execution' (Noverre 1760: 397; trans. 1966: 143). As a rhetoric figure, 'distribution' means the division and enumeration of the qualities of a subject in an orderly manner (Diderot and D'Alembert 1754: 1062b). Noverre undoubtedly keeps in mind the division of a story into distinct scenes or *tableaux vivants* in which the character would reveal some inner state. 'Execution,' in turn, refers to the faithful representation of the corresponding emotion. In describing his ballets, Noverre is less interested in the succession of actions than in staging situations where the actors reveal the inner states of their characters. The spectators can infer the meaning of events from the evoked emotional reactions. The scene of the nymphs fleeing the fauns is an example of this. To develop the plot, it would suffice to depict two groups of dancers running: women and men, but Noverre stretches the action to demonstrate the different psychological reactions of the pursuers and the pursued (1757; 1760: 9-14, 404-419).

> Furthermore, by the word *action* I do not mean that which consists merely of moving about, exerting oneself, making efforts, and tormenting oneself like a madman in order to jump, or to display a soul one does not possess. Action in dance is the art of transferring our sentiments and passions to the souls of the

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

> spectators by means of the true expression of our movements, gestures and features. (1760: 262; trans. 1966: 99)

Instead of giving precise instructions on movement, Noverre describes what Konstantin Stanislavski would call 'given circumstances.' Immersing themselves in the scene, the actors seek to feel into the role and find appropriate and natural bodily expressions.

> The *maître de ballet* must continually rehearse a mimed scene until the performers have arrived at that moment of expression innate in mankind, a precious moment that is revealed with both strength and truth when it is the outcome of feeling. (1760: 122; trans. 1966: 52-53)

Such living pictures must be expressive in all their details, because the faithful imitation of nature masks illusion from the spectator and transports them to the spot where the action has taken place. The illusion of reality helps the audience perceive the dancer as a close other, a necessary condition for considering bodily expressions as signs of an inner state. A vibrant performance depends more on the emotional commitment to the role than on the verbal instructions. 'When dancers are animated by their feelings, they will assume a thousand different attitudes according to the varied symptoms of their passions' (1760: 122; trans. 1966: 52-53). Then, even technical dance can acquire an expressive color. In the entrées, the leading soloists must combine the grace of their bodies with ideas, writes Noverre (1760: 180, trans. 1966: 72).

Having established that nonverbal emotional reactions possess communicative potential, Noverre rejected the rules of verbal dramaturgy: Ballet is brother to poetry, it cannot be restrained by the narrow rules of drama. Dancers convey the plot through the reflection of psychological states in contrasting emotional expressions from which the audience can infer the events.

Noverre avoids cataloging discrete signs because bodily expressions are holistic, and each emotion has accents and gradations depending on the people and situations.

> I will not attempt to analyze it. This subject is so delicate and fleeting that I will leave it to those who have the art of finding words that are capable of developing the correct idea that you can form of these momentary accents. The words 'grave' and 'acute,' 'prompt' and 'slow,' 'soft' and 'strong,' offer only very imperfect definitions. (1807: 137)

The last sentence mentions nothing more than the three dimensions of Laban's concept of the Effort: flow, time, and weight. It can be stated that Noverre clearly distinguishes here between δύναμις and πάθος.

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The dancers' bodies are different, and this is why the same movement appears slightly different depending on the dancer performing it. It is up to the dancer to find an expression appropriate for their body, and thereby they become the creator of the ballet. 'This sublime intonation, these accents, and this cry of nature that brings tears to the spectators' eyes and transports them to the sweetest and most heart-rending illusions, fully testify to the merit of the performer' (Noverre 1807: 137). He emphasizes that verbal descriptions do not allow you to understand the ballet: It must be seen, and not just once (1757; 1760: 9-14, 404-419). Moreover, the body can tell much more than words. Noverre makes a distinction between pantomime and *ballet d'action*:

> There are undoubtedly many things that pantomime can only hint at, but in the realm of passions, there is a degree of expression that words cannot reach, or rather, for which words no longer exist. It is then that dance in action triumphs. A step, gesture, movement, and an attitude convey what nothing else can express: The more intense the feelings are that are to be depicted, the fewer words there are to render them. Exclamations, which are the ultimate expressions of the language of passions, become insufficient and are then replaced by gesture. (Noverre 1803: vii)

Giovanni-Andrea Gallini (1762), director of dances at the King's Theatre in London, praised Noverre's ideas and explained them in a clearer and more distinct language. Gallini approves of the rejection of classical dramaturgy. Dance, like painting, can only present situations to the eye; the choreographer's task is to extract the most picturesque situations that reveal the character's personality. To express the emotion of a character on stage, dancers must study the slightest nuances of passions, 'which nothing but a nice eye can perceive and which easily escape a superficial observer' (1762: 259). On stage, the dancer should diffuse expression throughout the whole body; every movement of every limb down to the fingertips should convey meaning. To give life to bodily movement, dancers must experience the represented emotions themselves – then, the eloquence of the body will produce a strong emotional effect and the charm of the moment because the viewer can quickly grasp its meaning.

Noverre's critic, Gasparo Angiolini, conceives of the action as an intelligible discourse. While Noverre compares the ballet to painting, Angiolini resorts to linguistic analogies. 'These movements, which these gestures were meant to form, so to speak, a continuous discourse: It was a kind of declamation, made for the eyes, the understanding of which was facilitated for the spectators by music with varied sonorities, according to whether the mime wanted to express love or hate as well as fury or despair,' Angiolini explains in the preface to his new production (1761: 4).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0011 | **punctum.gr**

Angiolini became aware of Noverre's programmatic statements in 1773 and immediately wrote a critical letter. His displeasure was caused by the disregard for classical rules of dramaturgy, the refusal to clearly describe the movements of the dancers and, consequently, the disregard for notation. Angiolini felt that his colleague was incompetent in matters of nonverbal communication, since he insisted that the audience could not do without printed programs. Angiolini rejected the 'painting' of scenes. Painting is overloaded with detail, it is lifeless, weak, and monotonous; whereas the progressive succession of ideas transforms pantomime into a lively, varied, and captivating dance. Ballet is a 'danced drama': Dancers tell the story by showing a logical sequence of events and, therefore, the performance must be extremely simple. Divertissements must not interrupt the main action and, as a result, break the dramatic unity. Describing his own ballets, Angiolini lists sequences of cause-and-effect actions, but he is not interested in illustrating the psychology of the character. He avoids the words 'passion,' 'soul,' and 'to feel,' which are so abundant in Noverre's writings. Noverre relies on the depiction of emotional states: Since human beings experience similar emotions and their bodily expressions reflect this, the audience can understand the emotions represented and infer the events. Angiolini considers the *ballet d'action* to be the imitation of some aspects of real-life behaviors. He cites as an example the choreography of his mentor, Franz Hilverding, who, well before Noverre, in 1742, replaced the masks of the *commedia dell'arte* with 'natural characters of grain threshers, charcoal burners, Hungarian gypsies, Tyrolians, Moravians, etc., and each of these dances was represented by a short action adapted to the habits, customs, and condition of these characters' (1773: 12).

Like Noverre, Angiolini (1765) also addressed the emotional competence of dancers, which he called 'expression' or 'the art of speaking through dancing.' To express passions, dancers must be deeply moved by what they want to represent and convey these emotions to the audience. Angiolini, who always demanded clear instructions from Noverre, did not explore this subject in depth. Moreover, he only expected this emotional competence from the principal dancers, while Noverre required all the dancers on stage to paint the characters.

Indeed, Angiolini was unaware of the nonverbal cues that might indicate emotions. This conclusion emerges from his analysis of choreographic notation. Noverre maintained that emotions are distinguished by certain momentary accents that cannot be named, much less notated. Here, notation is not only useless but also a source of confusion and deception, since it is impossible for a dancer to decipher hundreds of codes. For Angiolini, the motricity of ballet is a combination of invariant movements, differing only in how they are executed by the body. A modification results from the morphology of the dancer but does not alter the dance. The notation records the invariant, 'and all this varies in a thousand ways and in a thousand ways it is linked to

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taste, chance, and the spirit of the music' (Angiolini 1773: 56). However, bodily signs created by taste and chance cannot express emotions intentionally, in accordance with the dramaturgical rules so dear to Angiolini.

Another point of contention concerns the use of the programs. Angiolini (1775) argues that pantomime can convey complete information about the action, whereas Noverre insists on textual explanations. Indeed, the interpretation of the bodily expressions so abundant in his productions depends on the contexts of interaction, which can be made explicit in the program.

In developing their concepts of *ballet d'action*, Noverre and Angiolini considered the different meanings of the word *action* (see Diderot and Alembert 1751: 120-121). Noverre likely drew on the common definition in oratory: The speaker's outward appearance, eloquence of the body, through which they convey feelings and passions to the audience. Angiolini based his approach on the definition current in the literature: The plot and events that constitute the subject of a poem. Both kinds of action are relevant to *ballet d'action*. It is just that Noverre writes about the πάθος, and Angiolini favors the πρᾶξις. Disagreements in choreographic notation reveal the various approaches to the expressive potential of the δύναμις: For Angiolini, it is simply a random token of the φορά as the type; for Noverre, these subtle differences constitute distinct types that tell something about the character.

Conclusion

The designation *ballet d'action* refers to the goal of the ballet reformers, but they conceived of 'action' in different ways. Cognitivists envisioned a progression of events represented by imitations of some aspects of motricity characteristic of social, demographic, and professional groups as well as of somatic and psychological bodily states. In Plutarch's typology, this is πρᾶξις. Scholars strive to describe movements as discrete signs that choreographers compose in meaningful actions and convey through notation to the dancers who follow the score. Perceptualists envisioned a sequence of the inner states of the characters embodied by the dancers; the spectators inferred the meaning of the action from their own emotional experience. This is the πάθος. The holistic bodily expressions of emotions defy any detailed description and cannot be fixed by choreographic notation. To find the appropriate signs, the dancers must feel into the role within the given circumstances. In doing so, they become co-creators of the performance, and the particularities of their unique embodiment of the role are not constrained by the notation. As to the δύναμις, cognitivists conceived of the variations in executing of the poses and movements as tokens of invariant types; for perceptualists, it had potential meaning. The main differences between the two approaches to ballet are summarized in the following table.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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	Angiolini	**Noverre**
Action	Plot	Body eloquence
Choreography	Dramaturgical sequence of events	Scenes revealing the characters' inner states
Nonverbal signs	Discrete	Holistic
Individual execution	Does not change the meaning	Can change the meaning
Dance score	Possible	Not possible
Dancers	Perform the score	Create the characters
Character creation	By learning the rules	By feeling-into the role
Programs	Unnecessary – the sequence of movements shows the events	Necessary – text aids in understanding the context of isolated scenes

Angiolini and Noverre, emblematic figures of the cognitivist and perceptualist paradigms, should not, however, be considered bitter adversaries. The different bodily signs that they describe do not make two different semiotics of ballet, and in the *ballet d'action*, they are perfectly compatible. However, as Valeria de Luca observes, semiotics has only begun to address the passion and body aspects of meaning 'in recent decades'; moreover, the semiotics of dance has only marginally touched upon this issue due to the challenges encountered in its analysis (2017: 57). De Luca's overview of contemporary dance semiotics suggests that researchers have primarily focused on the πρᾶξις and δύναμις aspects of dance, which are reducible to discrete and analyzable signs. Indeed, Noverre has been criticized for his inability to explicate his version of the *ballet d'action* and provide clear instructions to the dancers (e.g., Blasis 1828; Goudar 1773). The communication of emotions disappeared from analysis until German scholars of art proposed the concept of *Einfühlung* or 'feeling-into' (Vischer 1873; Lipps 1903). In English, it was introduced as 'empathy' (Titchener 1909). The American ballet critic John Joseph Martin applied this concept to ballet under the name 'metakinesis,' which 'comes not by intellectual planning but by "feeling through" with a sensitive body' (1933: 59). Kinesthetic sympathy allows spectators to mirror the dancer's muscle work, and metakinesis allows intentions to be inferred from movement, as the spectator compares the observed movement to their

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own experience and retrieves the interpretation from memory, Martin explained. However, in a later work, Martin (1939) abandoned the notion of metakinesis. In Russia, the idea of the bodily expression of emotions found greater success. *Einfühlung*, literally translated as *vchuvstvovanie*, became the core of the acting method developed by director Konstantin Stanislavski (1938). The Russian ballet school remains faithful to this tradition of emotional expression. Scholars and critics writing in Russian are very attentive to the feeling-into the role, but they also lack the conceptual apparatus for an analytical description of emotional dance.

What was once called πάθος, *Einfühlung*, empathy or *vchuvstvovanie* is now conceptualized as 'embodiment.' These new theories are the subject of many criticisms (De Luca 2017). Neuroscience distinguishes between more specific processes of perceiving the bodies of others. It does not claim that meaning is biologically predetermined. It merely shows that we can perceive bodies as holistic signs and that emotions and actions constitute their interpretation, which defies any exhaustive verbal description. Ballet reformers took this for granted, but contemporary dance semiotics has yet to develop a conceptual framework for analyzing emotional bodies.

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Computational choreographies:
Dance gesture between semiotic transduction and Artificial Intelligence

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BY: **Nicolas Chiappucci**

ABSTRACT

Within the emerging ecosystem of practices that integrate dance and new technologies, the choreographic gesture joins a radically new regime of translation, in which the body is transformed into a diagrammatic form that can be algorithmically manipulated. The article examines how computational systems reconstruct dance by passing through intermediate semiotic languages that select, segment, and reorganize properties of movement. Through three case studies – algorithmic reconstruction of movement, music-to-dance generation, and natural language-to-dance generation – it analyses the transductive processes that make dance manipulable, recombinable, and generable. In this article, building on our analysis, we offer a semiotic perspective on the regimes of intelligibility associated with dance technology, highlighting their limitations and potential as creativity support tools.

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Introduction

Around 1960, researchers began to explore possible forms of collaboration between computers and dance. Even dance, as an art grounded in human movement and seemingly far removed from technological interaction, appeared capable of contributing to the development of a new discipline: the field of *dance technology*. At the core of this emerging convergence was the idea that technology could function as a supportive tool for complex or labor-intensive tasks. At the same time, the project was highly ambitious, supporting the idea of eventually developing a human movement specification language

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that could be understood by both computers and humans. A decisive moment was David Sealy's work at the University of Iowa, where he developed a series of computer programs for *Labanotation* designed to modify and process dance scores entered into the system (1981). Between the 1950s and the early 1970s, authors such as Birdwhistell (1970) and Paul Bouissac (1973) advanced different proposals for the formalization of bodily movement, constructing heuristic models inspired by structuralism. Birdwhistell drew upon the methods of structural linguistics in an attempt to formalize kinesic language as an indicator of the forms of behavior interwoven among individuals (Jolly 2000). By contrast, in Bouissac's work, gesture, examined as part of a project devoted to the structural analysis of acrobatic forms, was recognized for its informational potential rather than treated as evidence of non-observable properties of the subject, such as intention or consciousness. The analysis of a gestural sequence, studied as a form of practice (Kristeva 1968), could consequently benefit from a set of procedures consistent with processes of measurement or automated analysis, including the reduction of the problem to elementary properties or to three-dimensional spaces delimited by the extreme points of movement.

These reflections on the formalization of bodily movement, together with the gradual development of dance technology, coincided with dance's transition into a post-modern era, in which it was finally conceived as a language susceptible to deconstruction and reconstruction and where it was possible to 'set up analytic structures and explode them' (Mackrell 1991). The experiments of the *Judson Dance Theater*, in which choreographic practice, supported by a reflexive awareness of the possibilities of performance, focused on the 'improvisational spontaneity of task-based aesthetics and on the exploration of compositional relations between heterogeneous elements' (Monni 2023), capitalizing on theory. The performative act was thus brought closer to a linguistic act, while preserving a conscious awareness of the pragmatic concreteness of movement.

Contemporary systems associated with dance technology therefore belong to a long tradition of the semiotic formalization of movement. The possibility of reconstructing spatial relations – such as trajectories, curvatures, and synchronizations – through algorithmic procedures has opened numerous opportunities for collaboration among dancers, choreographers, and new technologies. It should nevertheless be remembered that dance 'is structurally held together by a relational synthesis that is constantly renegotiated.' Its computational reconstruction, whatever the intended purpose, therefore constitutes a complex undertaking, precisely because of the specific features of this art of bodily movement, which presents itself as a multimodal language (Pan 2025).

Dance does not possess a stable system of notation comparable, for instance, to that of music. Indeed, music has succeeded in transforming a potentially infinite temporal

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substance into a divisible and reconstructible structure, thereby fostering, over the centuries, the development of numerous forms of notation (Randi 2021). It consequently becomes difficult to address the computational process of dance virtualization, especially when dance is conceived as a universal code, as might be presupposed in the case of computational translation. Dance does not generally rely on rigid, specifically choreographic codifications, although notation systems such as *Benesh Movement Notation* (Benesh and Benesh 1969) represent significant attempts to formalize movement. Instead, it draws on non-exclusive codes, such as those governing facial expression or gestural mimesis (Zelinger 1979). Attempts to reconstruct dance within computational environments have therefore had to negotiate a particularly unstable balance, seeking to preserve both its fluidity and the specificity of the movement by which it is defined.

On the basis of these premises, the present contribution examines the semiotic value of dance in the process of its reconstruction within computational systems. If semiotics is the discipline that establishes, from a given point of view, a series of correspondences between otherwise heterogeneous objects (Paolucci 2010), the processes of transduction enacted in contemporary experiments provide a privileged point of departure for reflecting on the value of dance, as well as on the ways in which it is parametrized and codified.

1. History of dance technology

In 1966, Michael Noll, in his essay *Computers and the Visual Arts*, suggested that the arts could benefit from interaction with emerging technologies. In the field of choreography in particular, Noll envisioned that, through interaction with a computer, a choreographer could control the movement of a ballet represented in virtual form. In 1970, Sagasti and Page presented one of the earliest experiments in computer-generated choreography for multiple dancers, effectively realizing Noll's idea, albeit unknowingly. Their program organized performers' spatial displacements on a stage divided into thirteen hexagons, following rules of adjacency and entrance/exit. Positions were determined through a random generator, according to a logic akin to a Markov process.[1] The aim of the experiment was to demonstrate that the computer could support composition without replacing the choreographer. It was staged in 1968 at Penn State University, in a theatrical laboratory: in this context, the program determined the positions of six dancers across 107 movements set to a piece by Vivaldi, functioning as a potentially collaborative tool capable of producing variants from which the choreographer could select.

[6] A Markov process is a stochastic model in which the probability of transitioning to a subsequent state depends solely on the current state, and not on the sequence of preceding states.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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From this point onward, dance technology became a persistent research topic, leading, by the mid-1980s, to the publication of around one hundred essays on computer choreography (Politis 1987). From the 1990s onward, with the imminent emergence of ML systems, the possibilities offered by dance technology began to shift from supporting the creative process toward exploring more complex forms of interaction. In 1997, the choreographer Michael Klien developed the software *ChoreoGraph* with the aim of structuring and controlling, even in live performance, multiple components such as movement, music, video, and lighting according to a 'non-linear' choreographic logic. The first prototype, developed in the MAX environment, allowed modules to be rearranged along a timeline, with dancers receiving cues via on-stage monitors. With Duplex, a choreographic duet created by Klien in 2002 for the Ballett Frankfurt, the system evolved into an algorithmic engine capable of permuting modules in real time while maintaining structural constraints inspired by the classical pas de deux. Within the program, modules were assigned 'weights' and refresh rules to regulate frequency and repetition, so that each performance generated a different yet coherent configuration. The movement vocabulary remained human (choreographer and dancers), while the software produced a 'map' to be interpreted, shifting attention toward the performer's strategic and problem-solving capacities.

The advent of neural networks led to renewed interest in the relationship between choreography and technology, resulting in the development of highly interactive and participatory tools. Nogueira, Menezes, and de Carvalho (2024) estimate that between 2010 and 2023 at least 345 articles have investigated the interaction between ML systems and dance performance, particularly in relation to the development of choreographic *Creativity Support tools* (Shneiderman 2007). For instance, Jadhav, Joshi, and Pawar (2015) developed a system based on a genetic algorithm to generate new steps in Bharatanatyam, a highly codified form of classical Indian dance. More recently, Qin et al. (2023) proposed the model *Dancing Avatar*, a system that generates dance-like human motion videos (ensuring consistency of body and motion) from text and pose inputs using text-to-image diffusion models.

2. Reconstructing the dancing body: A semiotic epistemology

To approach the issue of body reconstruction in dance starting from a semiotic perspective, it is necessary to identify the entry point of our inquiry, which, as may be anticipated, lies in a process of reconstructing the realm of body possibilities in a virtual space. To conceive of the computational reconstruction of a dancer's movements, for instance within a three-dimensional environment, or to encapsulate an expressive style to imitate it or to use its structures to generate new movements, ultimately amounts

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to an act of formal reconstruction. As Wallis (1973) observes, however, the referential value of the choreographic and informational sign is, by its very nature, suppressed by processes of selection, simplification, and interpretation pertaining to its poetic dimension. The attribution of content in dance does not have a necessary character: it is a weakly coded movement, where the segmentation of units remains fluid, and the relation between content and expression is unstable. Movement, in fact, is performed by a practitioner, and even the process of smoothing or fluidifying movement is, to some extent, improvised. As the choreographer Merce Cunningham observed:

> First, I practice with the dancers, then I give them movements and actions to be performed in the dance, but I do not expect from them to repeat them exactly as I do. It is my job to find a way for dancers to move them as they would move themselves and to get most out of it. (Cunningham 1988:233, cited in Zdravkova-Djeparoska 2020)

Following Langer's ideas of *expressive form*, dance emerges when movement is transformed into a virtual gesture, detached from its immediate practical function and reorganized as an expressive symbolic form (1953). However, this symbolic openness is altered when movement is transferred into technological contexts and assigned a specific operational value. Certain features of movement are selected and reorganized according to the semantic and operational coherence prepared by the technological system. Indeed, the isotopization of dance effectively entails a form of 'necrosis' (Basso Fossali 2009), insofar as its value is reconsidered within heterogeneous contexts, such as those in which movement is assigned a specific function. It is nevertheless possible to identify a point of anchorage within the transductive process between dance and technology: reconstructing the body in motion implies the adoption of an epistemology through which dance can itself be conceived as a computational process.

To assume that computational transduction operates merely through the reconstruction of plastic features is already to presuppose the prior identification of an immanent organization. As a practice, dance emerges within a language that establishes the resistance of the dancing body to verbalisation: the moving body can never be fully rendered through verbal discourse; similarly, theory and practice cannot be clearly divided: they develop across different levels and constantly shape one another. Any attempt to formalize a choreographic repertoire, especially when it is connected to social, religious, and aesthetic functions, therefore presupposes an analytical operation of selection. The question, however, is not simply whether it is possible to record the position of the joints while leaving aside aspects such as perceived weight, fatigue, or breathing. More broadly, it concerns the way in which the body can function as a space of mediation between somatic experience and technical formalization. The body does not merely provide data to be measured, but allows embodied qualities to be

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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reorganized and translated into operational parameters. Such a translation can never be complete, since the qualities of movement cannot be entirely reduced to a set of measurable coordinates.

The resulting process of formal construction relates to an informational theory of meaning in which dance is understood as a system for activating movement patterns. That is, through the definition of precise algorithms capable of regulating movement and selection, a computational system can focus on the frequency of symbol transmission. In doing so, the variables of a model that would typically be considered static compensate for their own limitations through the presence of multiple parameters which, through an effective design process, become functions capable of accounting for a range of categories.

Computer-based systems can now be understood as fully-fledged semiotic systems, capable of 'providing a scaffolding for human cognition, directing points of view and extending or enhancing our cognitive possibilities and our capacity to know the world' (Paolucci 2021:282). An artificial intelligence system, for instance, grounded in Machine Learning (ML) algorithms, can be considered a genuine system of signification in Eco's sense, that is, linked to the socially conventioned possibility of generating sign-functions (1975:23) (cf. Picca 2025). Of course, anthropological questions concerning the interpretation of dance, as a system of meaning rooted in social contexts or as a language of emotions, shape the epistemological perspective from which the entry point of this investigation is defined. Even in the latter case dance remains a social institution, insofar as emotions themselves are culturally coded and situated (Blacking 1983). This perspective may also be extended through the exploration of enactivist approaches in dance, conceived as an embodied and participatory process of sense-making emerging from an active interaction between individuals, others, and their environment (Van Alphen 2014; Lindberg, Marin and Silverman 2023).

2.1. **Dance as pseudo-language**

According to Margolis (1983), it is difficult to speak of an analogy between dance and language. A dance step, for instance, may exhibit features akin to a 'romantic languor without representing, referring to, exemplifying, or symbolizing such languor' (Margolis 1974). We can insist on this point by establishing a thematic correlation with what has been discussed earlier: the dancing body is both an object of representation and the subject of its own experience. Moreover, performance emerges from the involvement of the body within a cultural context, which activates somatic modes of perception (Sellers-Young 2025) that contribute to shaping the signifying value of the gesture. Dance follows regularities that underlie the sign occurrences taking place during performance. There is nothing particularly new in this perspective: neither in adopting an epistemological paradigm for investigating the language of dance that reveals how it

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is not a language, yet is structured like one (Bannerman 2014), nor in conceiving language itself as governed by hypothetical processes that operate according to regularities rather than strict rules (Paolucci 2010). However, if we are faced with a repertoire of movements that, despite their potential for categorization, are governed by a *ratio difficilis* (Eco 1975), how can we reinscribe this pseudo-language within a computational system? If a code is imposed, even if it allows for various combinations, it inevitably results in a limitation of the range of possible choices. It therefore becomes necessary to shift perspective: according to Blacking, since dance is an embodied system of signification that operates according to its own logic, there is no need to apply linguistic models to it. Its meaning does not lie in its being a code, but in the process and experience that emerge when it is considered as human action and intention (1983). Consequently, Blacking's critique redefines, rather than excludes, the possibility of a computational approach to dance.

Since dance cannot be directly formalized as a fully coded language, computation cannot limit itself to encoding its units and meanings. It must instead pass through an intermediate level of description: a second semiotic system through which correlations, segmentations, and operational regularities can be constructed. It is no coincidence that dance technologies may be regarded as transductive devices. Joshi and Chakrabarty (2021), in introducing the concept of *Dance Automation*, classified its possible forms into six categories: *dance representation, dance capture, dance semantics, dance generation, dance-processing approaches, and dance automation systems*. Although not all these operations constitute a direct semiotic transduction between fully formed systems, each involves a transfer from one domain to another (Paolucci 2010). The mediating language does not translate dance in its entirety; rather, it provides a relational structure through which certain properties of movement become formalizable in accordance with the technology under consideration. Dance is thus reinscribed through music, natural language, notation, or other descriptive systems, each of which selects and organizes different properties of movement.

This process is primarily intersemiotic in nature, since it brings heterogeneous systems of signification into relation. It may, however, assume a semi-symbolic mode of operation when the relation between the two languages is not based on a rigid correspondence between individual units, but on homologation between categories: for example, between musical continuity and kinetic fluidity, rhythmic discontinuity and gestural segmentation, or sonic intensification and the expansion of movement. The computational system therefore constructs an intersemiotic interface in which certain categories belonging to the mediating language are correlated with categories of movement, without this correlation constituting a fully stable or univocal code. In this way, the computational reconstruction of dance does not reduce it to a stable code, but preserves its status as a pseudo-language, together with its aleatory and processual character.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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The following pages will therefore examine the transductive processes that make it possible to reconfigure dance as a practice within computational systems designed to support creativity and interaction. Drawing on three strands of research, the present study identifies three forms of computational transduction of the language of dance:

- Algorithmic reconstruction of dance
- Music-to-dance transduction
- Natural language-to-dance transduction

3. Computational transductions of dance

3.1. **Algorithmic reconstruction of dance**

Forms of human–AI dance are constituted through a creative and kinematic collaboration between human and artificial intelligence, in which the two (or more) agents involved are capable of influencing one another's decision-making processes (Marin-Bucio 2026). The analysis here developed focuses on *Cyber Subin*, a project created by Klunchun and Pataranutaporn (2024).

The Human–AI Co-Dancing system developed for *Cyber Subin* provides a particularly useful case through which to examine the algorithmic reconstruction of dance. Designed to demonstrate how computational models may incorporate choreographic principles through processes of movement transduction, the system allows human performers and virtual agents to collaborate in real time in the production of choreographic forms. By encoding principles extracted from the traditional Thai dance *Mae Bot Yai*, the computational model can manipulate the movements of a virtual avatar, endowing it with what may be described as a form of 'choreographic intelligence.' The construction of this intelligence requires the choreographic principles underlying the traditional repertoire to be translated into algorithmic procedures capable of modifying the avatar's movement data. The resulting computational model is integrated into an interactive web-based interface and rendered through a three-dimensional graphics engine. Dancers, choreographers, and spectators can consequently control its choreographic parameters through voice commands, menus, and sliders. By modifying these parameters in real time, users may alter the avatar's movement qualities, select the body parts upon which the algorithms operate, or combine different choreographic principles during the performance.

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The choreographic principles are computationally rendered through mathematical filters, temporal variations, inverse-kinematic procedures, and transformations of the avatar's animation data. They derive from the six principles formulated by the Thai choreographer Pichet Klunchun within *No. 60*, a project based on the deconstruction of the choreographic forms of *Mae Bot Yai* (see Fig. 1):

- ***Energy concerns*** the dynamic quality and vitality of movements and choreographic phrases, including variations in force, momentum, acceleration, and deceleration.
- ***Circles & Curves*** concerns the circular trajectories, arcs, and curved lines traced by the body in space, as well as the opposition between rounded and linear movement patterns.
- ***Axis Points*** identifies the joints and bodily segments that function as axes of rotation, orientation, and balance, establishing the principal pivot points around which movement is organized.
- ***Synchronous Limbs*** concerns the coordination of different limbs, sides, and regions of the body, exploring the relation between synchronous and asynchronous movement.
- ***External Body Spaces*** describes the spatial configurations and geometrical relations produced between the body and its surrounding environment, including the directions, planes, and dimensions through which it moves.
- ***Shifting Relations*** concerns the manner in which transitions between poses and movements direct the spectator's attention towards different bodily regions and actions, while producing continuity between successive forms.

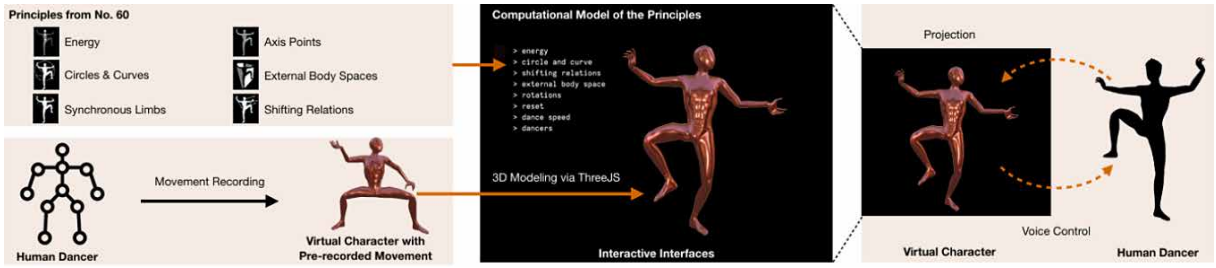


Figure 1. Technical pipeline of the Human–AI Co-Dancing project. Reproduced from Pataranutaporn et al. (2024, Fig. 5), © 2024 the authors, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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Although the development of the system begins with motion-capture recordings of professional dancers, which are required to animate the avatar's digital skeleton, the body of the dancer gradually gives way to an animated corporeal envelope devoid of an autonomous self. The computational model establishes pertinent thresholds of excitation and inhibition that delimit the avatar's field of possible forms. The algorithmic operations applied to the recorded movement focus specifically on defining thresholds of inertia and saturation, in the sense proposed by Fontanille (2008). At this level, the kinematic engine redistributes the actantial roles involved in the performance. The avatar's movement is organized in relation to an auto-tracking camera whose displacement keeps the digital figure constantly centered within the screen. At the same time, gradients of velocity and the degree of synchronization between poses are modulated in response to the dancer's instructions, since voice commands allow the performer to recalibrate the relevant parameters during the act of co-dancing. Agency is therefore distributed across a network of mediations that tends to minimise the centrality of the fleshly body in favour of the digital nature of the choreographic undertaking.

The project subsequently developed into an experimental workshop in which human dancers were invited to perform alongside the digital avatar, each responding to the movements of the other. It therefore situates itself within the domain of posthuman performance, insofar as the value of the event no longer resides exclusively in either the human body or the digital figure, but in the forms of interaction established between them. If dance is 'held together structurally by a relational synthesis, which is constantly renegotiated' (Vézina 2006:45), Cyber Subin produces a corresponding repositioning of meaning: participatory practice and the complex mechanism of shared affordances give rise to a new choral configuration.

A critical qualification is nevertheless necessary. Although remarkable from the perspective of its transductive construction, such an assemblage risks assuming the character of an *exercice de style*. Its most visible effects appear to derive from the dissociation between the figures occupying the stage, a dissociation intensified by the evident limitations of the digital puppet's movements and resulting in a persistent sense of disjunction between human and machine, particularly when the number of virtual avatars increases.[2] From a semiotic perspective, and more specifically from that of the enunciation in progress, the virtual avatar seems to contribute primarily to the plane of expression, without fully constituting itself as a body capable of functioning as a vector of impulses and resistances. Fontanille's account of the body, acquiring the status of an actantial basis (2013), makes it possible to specify this limitation. If corporeal individuation emerges through the tension between programming and the body's inertia, through its capacity to resist, deviate from, or exceed the prescribed course of action, the avatar appears, by

[2] A practical demonstration of the project is available at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f2pSC58tWg

contrast, as a predominantly heteronomous actant, whose movements tend to coincide with the operational logic of the system. The margin of indeterminacy through which a body imposes its own conditions upon action is missing. Indeed, sudden changes in rhythm such as failures, delays, perturbations, and deviations should therefore constitute the potential conditions under which the avatar may cease to function as a simple expressive output and begin to emerge as a semiotically individuated body-actant.

3.2. **Music-to-dance transduction**

The creation of new dances remains an open challenge in the field of emerging technologies. Dance-generation techniques may be broadly divided into three categories: methods based on textual descriptions, visual inputs, and music. Music-driven approaches aim to produce dynamic and engaging movements synchronized with the rhythm and style of an input musical track.

Dance becomes computationally generable only insofar as it is preliminarily segmented into syntactic units corresponding to states, poses, transitions, and local responses. While music provides temporal and dynamic constraints, the body is reformulated as a chain of combinable units. The meaning of the gesture, here, depends on its position within a sequence, its relation to preceding and subsequent elements, and its rhythmic inscription. At this point, however, a critical question emerges. In order to generate dance, the system must fragment the semiotic languages involved into operationally distinguishable units. Such discretisation nevertheless risks interrupting the phenomenological unity of movements, which, within choreographic perception, function as indivisible wholes. If musical meaning is not primarily located in denotative semantics, but rather in a plurality of intentional levels and meaning-making processes extending from prereflective corporeality to intersubjective sharing (Giacosa 2023), the relation between music and dance appears less as a simple conversion between media than as a transduction between two organizations of movement.

Even at its most elementary levels, musical experience is grounded in dynamics of temporality, tension, affectivity, and vitality. Listening to music consequently entails experiencing an articulation of the body within its own internal space-time: a form of movement that has not yet become visible in geometrical space, but is lived as dynamism, force, impulse, suspension, continuity, and release. The aesthetic experience of music articulates the listener's body by generating a sensation of movement and vitality. Musical sounds are themselves perceived as sounds in motion, endowed with an expressive directionality that exceeds their mere acoustic succession and produces an internal co-movement within the subject.

Existing experiments (Gong et al. 2023; Li et al. 2022; Marchellus and Park 2023) have frequently treated dance generation as a matching problem, in which generation is organized through associations between musical inputs and already encoded

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0012 | **punctum.gr**

motor units, sometimes collected within a codebook. In doing so, however, these systems reveal substantial limitations arising from the necessary compromise between technical precision and artistic expressivity. A generation system based on a codebook may produce a syntactically coherent succession of movements, but it does not necessarily generate a unified choreographic text. Such a text should articulate relations of expectation, transformation, and contrast that cannot be reduced to the synchronic correspondence between gesture and beat. Nor can the problem be exhausted by rhythmic synchronization, since choreography may establish different relations with melody. Dance generation will consequently tend to reproduce the regularities found within the training corpus, thereby producing stylistic stereotypes and limiting the emergence of unexpected creative forms.

This issue leads to the second case study: *BADM*, the Bidirectional Autoregressive Diffusion Model proposed by Zhang et al. (2024) for music-to-dance generation. Whereas much of the existing literature focuses on translating music into a continuous sequence of human poses, BADM constructs dance progressively by segmenting musical features, beat information, and motion sequences into corresponding temporal slices. The model represents the body as a sequence of articulated poses and generates each segment by jointly considering the relevant musical condition, the rhythmic organization of the beat, and its relation to neighbouring portions of movement.

Once generated, the individual motion slices are concatenated and processed by a local information decoder, which refines the transitions between adjacent frames and contributes to producing a choreographic sequence that is both globally coherent and rhythmically aligned with the music. The value of a movement therefore no longer depends exclusively on its relation to the past, as was the case in conventional unidirectional autoregressive experiments, but also on the position it occupies in relation to what will follow. The gesture becomes part of a broader relational structure, acquiring meaning through anticipation and continuity, both retrospectively and prospectively.

Earlier codebook-based models adopted relatively stable syntagmatic and paradigmatic organizations, since the value of each movement was determined through correspondences established during training. BADM instead introduces a dynamic syntagmatics in which the structure is progressively updated throughout the generative process. Each portion of movement remains partially underspecified until it is related both to previously generated segments and to the prospective distribution of subsequent ones. Incrementality and underspecification thus become constitutive principles of generation rather than deficiencies to be eliminated.

Bidirectionality does more than improve the technical smoothness of the output. Each gesture is determined retrospectively by the presuppositions established by the preceding movements and prospectively by the virtual transformations opened by those that may follow. It modifies the temporal regime through which the movement acquires

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value. The generated gesture becomes a relational unit whose configuration depends upon a field of local expectations. The model therefore attempts to reproduce, at an operational level, a minimal form of choreographic anticipation: each movement is selected according to both the memory of what has occurred and the constraints projected by what may occur next. In this way, a minimal choreographic-semantic competence takes shape, as the model actualizes, at each step, one movement from a field of virtual possibilities defined by memory, anticipation, and the current configuration of the sequence.

Ultimately, however, the dances produced through this methodology retain a predominantly supportive function. They are presented less as autonomous choreographic works than as instruments for assisting creation and assessing whether the proposed techniques outperform previous systems in generating sequences that remain physically plausible, locally coherent, and rhythmically attuned to music. The evaluation of the model consequently continues to privilege the efficacy of music–motion alignment. Although bidirectionality expands the relational structure of the sequence, the question remains as to whether such technical coherence is sufficient to produce a choreographic text endowed with aesthetic unity, internal transformation, and expressive necessity.

3.3. **Natural language-to-dance transduction**

A further form of dance generation based on a transductive process consists in exploiting the expressive and descriptive capacities of natural language to facilitate the production of choreographic forms. The example considered here is *DanceGen*, introduced by Liu and Sra (2024) as a choreography-support system intended for the preparatory stages of choreographic practice, including ideation and early prototyping. Its central process consists in generating choreographic sequences from textual descriptions through a crucial intermediate operation: the transformation of language into a computational representation. DanceGen performs this operation through *CLIP*, a neural model trained to encode textual and visual data within a shared representational space. The user provides a linguistic description of a dance, which may include actions, movement qualities, styles, or affective atmospheres (see Fig. 2). The system does not interpret these expressions through an explicit symbolic grammar. Instead, it converts them into semantic embeddings: numerical vectors that represent the text within a multimodal latent space acquired during training.

Since CLIP is trained on image–text pairs, it produces representations that establish correlations between linguistic and visual content. Within DanceGen, its textual embeddings function as semantic conditioning for a diffusion-based motion-generation model. Although the prompt does not directly specify the movements to be performed, it delineates a semantic field that guides the generation of a sequence of bodily poses. The model consequently produces a temporal series of human postures that constitutes one possible choreographic interpretation of the prompt.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12**:01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0012 | punctum.gr

The generated sequence is not conceived as an automatically completed choreography, but as material for creative ideation. Choreographers may explore its variations, modify individual portions, combine different sequences, or use the resulting movements as compositional stimuli. Natural language therefore provides an initial interface for the generation and subsequent transformation of choreographic material, within a broader system that also allows users to edit, extend, blend, and document the generated sequences. The interaction mediated by CLIP may consequently be understood through a supramodal approach (Gangemi and Nuzzolese 2025), in which the meaning of the units represented within the vector space is determined by the possible syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations they establish with one another. Greater emphasis is thus placed on the cognitive dimension: rather than maintaining a rigid distinction between lexical structure and conceptual organization, the model establishes a continuous interaction between the two.

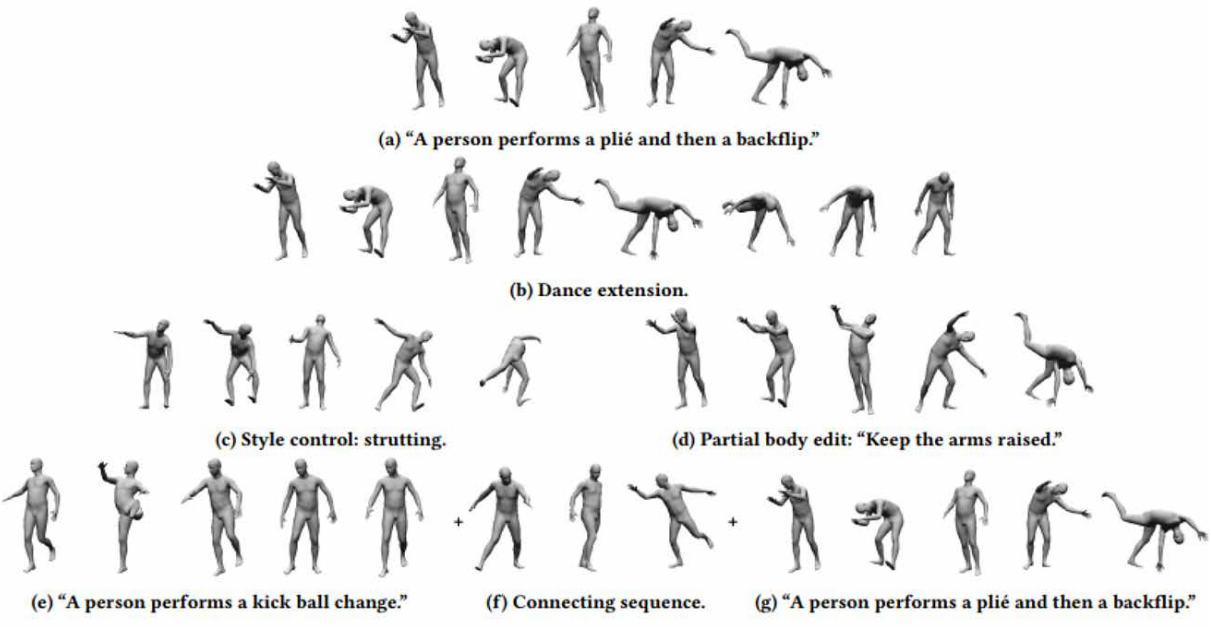


Figure 2. Examples of dance generation through linguistic prompts. Reproduced from Liu and Sra (2024, Fig. 5), © 2024 the authors, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

In this case, however, annotation passes through a computational mediation operating directly within the model's multimodal semantic space, rather than through the adoption of an explicit symbolic notation system, as occurs in traditional choreographic writing. Dance as a practice remains intrinsically embodied, since its meaning emerges from the articulation of the body in space, from rhythm and movement quality, and from the relations established with the environment and with other bodies.

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Traditional choreographic notation constitutes a particular form of translation. Movement is first translated into written symbols capable of recording the choreography; these symbols subsequently become the source text from which movement is reconstructed in performance. This double passage inevitably introduces margins of interpretation and makes notation a privileged site from which to observe the performative and embodied nature of translation.

In DanceGen, by contrast, one is not confronted with notation in the strict sense. The system generates movement directly from a latent semantic representation of language. The translational process therefore does not occur between two stabilized symbolic systems – text and choreographic notation—but through a mediation that relates language, vision, and movement within a shared vector space. The textual prompt activates a particular region of this semantic space, from which the model generates a possible bodily interpretation.

The relation established between prompt and movement does not therefore amount to the attribution of a fixed motor equivalent to each linguistic unit. Rather, the embedding condenses a network of semantic proximities that provides the generative model with a field of constraints. Transduction no longer consists in replacing words with movements according to a predetermined code, but in passing from a linguistic configuration to a probabilistic distribution of possible bodily forms. What is preserved throughout this process is not the identity of individual units, but a relational organization that the system reconstructs through another expressive substance.

It remains to be asked whether natural language can constitute both the point of departure and the primary mediating device for the generation of choreographic forms. In doing so, dance would be defined in relation to a codified system, or at least to one interpreted as such by a computational system. As Judith Hanna observes, just as dance conveys to its audience a multiplicity of meanings, including unpredictable elements, references to what is not immediately present, and components shaped by cultural transmission, it is also articulated through a plurality of channels, including motor, auditory, olfactory, and proxemic ones (Hanna 1977). Reducing the multiple points of access to dance to natural language therefore risks limiting the expressive potential of movement and excluding the meaningful interpretative variations inherent in it.

Ultimately, the system's potential lies in using language as a generative constraint: ideally accelerating prototyping and introducing variations that might not emerge through conventional compositional procedures. In this sense, DanceGen attempts to turn language into movement by translating a semantic organization that can be articulated linguistically into a bodily form that may already take shape, even if we do not yet know how to describe or formalize it with the same precision.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12**:01:2026
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4. Conclusion: perspectives and possibilities of dance technology

According to McFee, 'danceworks depend on the specific physicality of the dancers'; indeed, dancers do not cause the dance; rather, they are the dance – their movements instantiate it' (2013:28). Dance may therefore be understood as a radical form of embodiment, one that depends upon the particular characteristics and capacities of the dancer's physical body. This becomes especially evident in improvisational practices and in the acquisition of unusual or non-habitual movement patterns, both of which require dancers to reconsider their relation to their own bodies in motion. Improvisational exercises also enable choreographers to explore possible developments of a choreography by asking the bodies already engaged in action to prolong, repeat, or transform their movements in response to specific instructions.

Reflecting on the relation between dance and embodied cognition, Carmona observes that dancers cannot memorise movements by relying upon perfectly defined mental images or upon a pre-existing conceptual organization of the world. They must instead exaggerate certain movements until 'the body remembers how to proceed' (2018: 41). Choreographic memory is therefore not simply the retrieval of a previously stored representation, but a practical reactivation of bodily dispositions through movement itself.

Within performance, embodiment concerns both bodily awareness and the subject's lived sense of their own body. Performative embodiment can consequently be conceived as a form of incorporated practical knowledge. As Dreyfus (1996) argues, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, the acquisition of a skill progressively transforms the relation between perception and action. The expert body does not proceed by applying explicit representations or rules but responds directly to the solicitations offered by the situation. Dance improvisation displays precisely this form of skillful coping, in which movement emerges from the dynamic interaction between body, accumulated experience, and environment.

This leads to a necessary qualification concerning both the experiments examined above and the broader potential of dance technology. The available software and computational instruments should primarily be understood as creativity support tools: devices capable of orienting and sustaining the choreographer's work with dancers, but not, at present, of replacing it. Since meaning is grounded in the situated experience of the individual, transductive processes of this kind tend to fall short whenever they claim to represent the full value of the languages they decompose.

This limitation concerns the absence of embodied experience, as well as the manner in which each of the systems analyzed here selects and reorganizes movement. After all, these models operate primarily upon the plane of expression of discourse. The semiotic systems upon which they intervene, however, already determine meaning through their own networks of relations. The syntacticisation of movement is itself situated within

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– and anticipated by – a system that establishes general relations of dependency between input and output in advance. Computational production therefore reaches textual outcomes through procedures that differ from the situated semiotic processes through which human subjects construct meaning (Haapaniemi et al. 2024).

At this point, semiotics becomes relevant insofar as it makes it possible to describe the regime of intelligibility established by the computational procedure: that is, the manner in which the continuity of gesture is reformulated as something segmentable, analyzable, and comparable. What emerges is not the reproduction of dance as such, but the construction of a new semiotic system.

The lack of equivalence with embodied dance does not, however, imply the absence of productive potential. If, as Lotman observed, every semiotic system constitutes a mechanism for the generation of new information (1985), the systems examined here can be understood as devices capable of producing a different version of dance: one that can be manipulated, compared, recombined, and generated through computational procedures. Their value does not therefore lie in preserving the identity of dance across the transductive process, but in constructing a new field of relations through which dance becomes technically operable. Similarly, as Ludskanov observes (as cited in Osimo 2010), whenever an intermediate language is introduced, a third semiotic system emerges, capable of relating the means and structures of the two languages between which it mediates. From this perspective, meaning within a computational system concerns precisely the actualization of translations among multiple signs. The intermediate language does not remain external to the systems it connects: by selecting correspondences, establishing dependencies, and determining the pertinent features of each input, it actively participates in the production of the resulting text.

Although such an artificial language is founded upon convention, the dimensionality of the system tends to expand exponentially through training on large-scale datasets. Algorithms and trained models can consequently make potential values, virtual social norms, actual intersubjective uses, and realized utterances simultaneously available within the same computational architecture (Paolucci 2021). As the code expands through its structural variability and approaches a potentially indefinite number of combinations, transductive operations become possible even for complex and weakly codified systems such as dance. This expansion, however, should not be confused with the acquisition of embodied experience. The multiplication of parameters increases the system's capacity to differentiate and recombine forms, but it does not transform the computational model into a situated dancing subject.

In conclusion, we hope to have shown how dance technologies operate by constructing intermediate semiotic transductions through which choreographic movement is selected, segmented, and reorganized. These systems neither faithfully reproduce the living body that makes dance possible nor possess the embodied and creative capacities required to generate new choreographic forms autonomously. Rather, at least for the

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time being, they should be understood primarily in terms of their supportive function and its potential, when interacting with human agents, to foster innovation in both educational and creative contexts. However, whereas such technologies were once largely confined to the construction of annotation systems, they now increasingly aim to achieve the most faithful possible representation of the human body in virtual environments. Although this objective has not yet been fully attained, current developments suggest that significant progress is being made in this direction.

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Co-choreographing with AI:
Novelty, intelligence, and skill

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BY: **Silvana Pani**

ABSTRACT

This paper asks what cognitive mechanisms enable the emergence of novel choreographic material in AI-assisted choreography. I defend three interrelated claims. First, current AI systems do not generate novelty independently, since their outputs consist in statistical recombination of existing movement patterns. Second, human-AI interaction expands the choreographic search space and yields more varied material than either system alone. Third, novelty arises through the coordination of heterogeneous representations (e.g., linguistic, imagistic, and sensorimotor) via cross-format translation and bodily evaluation. I argue that these processes converge in a distinctive, trainable skill: co-choreographing with AI. Finally, I contend that this activity is best understood as a form of co-intelligence in action, and that any grammar of co-choreography must be grounded in the cognitive organization underlying this coordinated creative process.

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Setting the stage

Semiotic accounts of choreography have long emphasized that dance derives meaning both from the way it refers to the world and from the internal organization of its own movement vocabulary and syntax (see, e.g., Foster 1986; Maiorani 2021). The present paper addresses a complementary question: what cognitive structures and mechanisms enable novel choreographic material to emerge when choreography is jointly produced by human and artificial intelligences? While the ideas developed here originate within analytic philosophy of mind, they concern notions that are central to semiotics, including representation, meaning, translation, coordination, and creativity.[1]

[1] For an introduction to some core semiotics questions, I rely, among others, on Sebeok (2001).

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The encounter between semiotics and dance is already a peculiar and relatively underdeveloped one, let alone in its relation to cognition and AI. One main reason for why a semiotic account of dance can be difficult to provide is that:

> At first sight, dance does not seem to make *sense* [my emphasis], given that it cannot relate to the linguistic concept of the sign. […] There is a rather small number of researches on dance both in its generality and on particular dances. (De Luca 2017: 58)

Bridging the divide between dance, semiotics, and cognition is more than a lexical or interdisciplinary exercise. Although both dance semiotics and cognitive studies are concerned with the notion of 'representation,' they typically address different explanatory questions. Semiotics is principally concerned with how meaning is generated, communicated, and interpreted through *signs*. A semiotic account of dancing:

> […] offers a blueprint for choreographic meaning, assimilating many choreographic conventions into five broad categories: (1) the *frame* – the way the dance sets itself apart as a unique event; (2) the *mode of representation* – the way the dance refers to the world; (3) the *style* – the way the dance achieves an individual identity in the world and in its genre; (4) the *vocabulary* – the basic units or 'moves' from which the dance is made; and (5) the *syntax* – the rules governing the selection and combination of moves.[2] (Foster 1986: 59)

According to this characterization, the mode of representation is a way for dance to referring to the world. My complementary interest in this paper is in the *representational structures* and processing that make the aforementioned mode of representation cognitively tractable.

Whereas semiotics is above all concerned with how representations function as signs the present account instead asks what cognitive mechanisms allow such signifying processes to occur in the first place. My aim is to identify some of the structural conditions that underlie the production, transformation, and stabilization of choreographic signs when human and artificial intelligences jointly participate in creative practice. The present paper integrates a representational story to a problem of allegedly limited scope as the emergence of novel dance material in AI-assisted choreography. While the discussion is restricted to this particular case, the proposed framework may also prove relevant to other forms of AI-assisted artistic and performative creation.

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[2] All emphases in these quotations are my own.

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I defend three interrelated claims about co-choreographing with AI. First, current AI systems do not generate novelty on their own: their outputs remain constrained by training data and consist primarily in recombination of existing movement patterns. Second, choreographic processes involving sustained human-AI interaction tend to produce more novel outcomes than either traditional choreographic methods or AI-generated material considered in isolation. Third, this increase in novelty is best explained by the joint operation of two forms of intelligence. Artificial systems expand the space of available possibilities and generate structurally coherent proposals that would be difficult to anticipate within human practice alone. Human choreographers, in turn, perform cognitively indispensable work: they try out, evaluate, rehearse, and transform these proposals through their own cognitive and bodily expertise, selectively stabilizing some trajectories, sequences, and other movement features while abandoning others.

1. Contemporary dance, choreography, and AI

Contemporary dance is a privileged site of choreographic exploration. It allows for a wide range of movement possibilities, and yet it remains structured by physical and task-based constraints, within which new material can emerge. A simple task, such as drawing one's name in space using only the head, illustrates how guided exploration can generate novel movement sequences (cf. Flatt 2019). This and similar practices foreground choreography not as the execution of predefined ideas, but as a process of structured creativity.

Also, contemporary dance is a blend of styles, influences, and improvisation, which makes it a malleable performative art, with high potential for integrating technological advances in its developments. Recent choreographic practices increasingly incorporate artificial intelligence systems trained on large archives of human movement. For example, the project *AISOMA* uses Wayne McGregor's choreographic repertoire as training material for machine learning models capable of generating movement sequences that can be explored, transformed, and integrated into choreographic processes. More broadly, recent studies document the growing use of machine learning tools in dance creation and performance, overviewing both potential gains and concerns.[3]

Artificial systems applied to dance do not merely record or reproduce movement: they propose structured variations on existing patterns, thereby entering the generative process of choreography itself.

At first glance, AI-systems are constrained by their training data and by the statistical architectures through which that data is processed. Their outputs are therefore

[3] For a detailed overview of the uses of machine learning in dance, I rely on Nogueira et al. (2024: 62-65).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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best understood as probabilistically guided reconfigurations of prior material, rather than as instances of autonomous creativity. If novelty depended solely on the internal capacities of such systems, its scope would appear limited.

However, drawing on recent claims on the nature of co-intelligence (cf. Mollick 2024) and on theories of cognitive representational pluralism (e.g., Camp 2007; Burge 2018; Quilty-Dunn 2020; Shepherd 2021), I contend that choreographic novelty in AI-assisted contexts emerges from the interaction between two distinct intelligences, one human and one artificial, each of them contributing to a common task with their available resources. On this view, choreography is neither the product of a single agent nor the mere output of an artificial intelligence process. It is a coordinated activity with multiple representational resources – e.g., linguistic prompts, imagistic structures, algorithmic outputs, and sensorimotor exploration – that are coordinated and continuously negotiated. Novel choreographic material arises at the interface between these resources, through processes that neither system could realize independently while achieving the same outputs.

A key point of the proposed view is that AI-assisted choreography does not require properly shared representations (motor or of whatever kind) between human and artificial systems. Coordination rather depends on alignment on task goals. Tranformation rules, constraints, and evaluative criteria then govern how representations of each intelligence system are produced and manipulated while contributing to the same choreographic goal.

This framework highlights the respective contributions of human and artificial intelligence – for one, with respect to the role of affect. In human choreographic practice, affectivity often determines salience and selection, shaping which possibilities are taken up and developed. The absence of such affective component in current AI systems introduces a productive asymmetry within the interaction, one that is central to the emergence of novel outcomes and leaves room for a division of labor between the human choreographer and the chosen AI system. If co-choreographing with AI is understood as a cooperative process, then an important question concerns the nature and structure of such *co-intelligence*. The present account does not compete with semiotic explanations; rather, it addresses a different explanatory level, as I am here only concerned with the representations that precede and sustain dance and choreography, and how their cognitive building blocks operate to produce and maintain dance practice.[4]

In sum, the main claim is that choreographic novelty emerges from the interaction between different systems, as marked out by the continuous negotiation between heterogeneous representational structures. In this light, we need to understand creativity and novelty as the upshot of coordinated activity between human and artificial intelligence.

[4] For genuinely semiotic approaches, compare Dondero et al. (2025); d'Armenio et al. (2025).

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2. Choreography as a structured practice

A typical trait of much choreographic practice in contemporary dance is that it often does not begin from fully specified ideas ready to be executed, but from structured exploratory procedures in which constraints, representational resources, and coordination mechanisms jointly shape the emergence of movement. For this reason, choreographic work in contemporary dance already provides a model of generative practice by itself, within which the integration of AI can be observed as a fruitful development.

2.1. Constraints as generative conditions

Choreographic practices can be said to be constrained in various ways. It is precisely the presence of constraints that enables the production of new material. There exist constraints pertaining to dance traditions, pre-existing materials, context, and many other relevant circumstances. More specifically, there are stylistic and practice-specific constraints, including training background, technique, and genre conventions. They all define repertoires of possible movement and transformation allowed within each choreographic setting. However important, these are not the kind of constraints I am interested in, although they may exercise an influence on which *cognitive constraints* apply to any given choreographic context. I here focus on the cognitive constraints as those that apply to the mental representations supporting the choreographic work. By *mental representation*, I refer to a cognitive state or structure that carries content and is available for cognitive processing. Representations differ not only in what they represent (i.e., their content) but also in the *format* through which content is structured, whether, for example, linguistic, imagistic, or sensorimotor. Content-wise, I distinguish between the following main classes of constraints.

First, there are *task constraints*, often introduced by means of instructions. Simple prompts, such as drawing one's name in space using only head movement or generating movement based on a limited set of action verbs (e.g. 'fold,' 'resist,' 'scatter'), restrict the available degrees of freedom while directing attention to specific movement parameters. These parameters structure the search space within which new possibilities can be explored by communicating what to do, and, at times, how to do it (cf. Flatt 2019). Tasks are typically communicated in language, though the instructions may vary in terms of precision, level of abstraction, and open-endedness.

Second, there are *bodily and physical constraints*. Movement is shaped by anatomical structure, balance, gravity, effort, and space. These constraints are not external limitations but intrinsic conditions of choreographic reasoning: they determine which movements are feasible, sustainable, and can be repeated over time.

Third, there are *temporal and musical constraints*, especially when choreography is developed in relation to rhythm, phrasing, or musical structure. Dancers must

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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somehow align movement with temporal patterns – whether by following, resisting, or reinterpreting them.

Consider, for example, a choreographer working with an AI system such as *AI-SOMA*. The choreographer may prompt the system to elaborate a short movement phrase while preserving a given stylistic quality. The AI generates several statistically plausible continuations, but these remain constrained by the task ('develop this phrase'), by bodily feasibility (whether the proposed transitions can actually be executed), and by temporal or musical requirements. The resulting choreography emerges not from unbidden generation, but from navigating multiple interacting constraints through repeated exchanges between the human and the artificial systems.

Taken together, the three aforementioned classes of constraints guide the creative process: they do not simply restrict action but actively shape the emergence of choreographic material by organizing the space of possibilities. Constraints operate on representations, and representations are available in different formats, as explained in the next section.

2.2. **Multimodal and multi-format practice**

Choreographic practice is both intrinsically multimodal – visual, auditory, tactile representations are jointly present almost at any time, whether or not practitioners are aware of them – and characterized by the coordination of heterogeneous representational formats, insofar as the represented content can take different structures.[5] The interaction between heterogeneous representational formats is one main source of choreographic novelty.

Movement generation may begin from linguistic prompts ('to suspend,' 'to collapse'), imagistic representations (e.g., visualizing an animal's movement or a spatial trajectory),[6] auditory patterns (musical phrasing, rhythm), or sensorimotor exploration grounded in bodily feedback. Different modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile) and representational format (e.g., language-like, motor) tend not to be exchangeable: each affords different operations and levels of specificity (see, e.g., Shepherd 2021). Linguistic instructions can guide intention but remain underspecified with respect to movement dynamics; visually imagistic structures preserve spatial and qualitative features; sensorimotor representations provide precise, executable content but are often difficult to communicate verbally and reproduce identically over time.

Choreographic work involves continuous transitions and negotiations across these formats and modalities. A verbal instruction may be developed into a movement phrase; a visual image may be embodied and transformed; a rhythm may be perceived and used to move around space. At each stage, the structure of the relevant representation may change, and with it, the content that can be generated and manipulated.

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[5] I am here using the terms *format* and *structure* interchangeably.
[6] On the use of mental imagery in movement creation, see, e.g., May et al. (2011).

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2.3. Representational coordination and shared practice

Choreography is rarely an individual activity. It is a coordinated practice involving multiple agents – choreographers, dancers, and, in some cases, technological systems – who must align their actions without necessarily sharing identical representations. Each participant may share the process while preserving their own individual mental states and action representations.

Coordination is achieved by sharing commitment to a given goal as well as by sharing the creative process itself and/or demonstrative mechanisms to achieve a common task-goal. One example is the use of *marking*, as analyzed by Kirsh (2010; 2013): dancers rehearse movement in a reduced, schematic form, preserving key structural features while omitting full execution. Marking functions as an intelligible abbreviation of movement, allowing dancers to communicate, remember, and refine material efficiently and without over-exercising. It provides a shared external scaffold that supports coordination without requiring fully specified or identical internal representations.

In a nutshell, coordination relies on publicly accessible *cues* (e.g., verbal instructions, counts, spatial references, rhythm) and a shared commitment to the task at hand. Dancers align their behavior not by reproducing all the same internal states, which would be impossible or, in any case, difficult to recognize, but by coordinating with each participant in the process. Coordination is, in this light, a continuous negotiation of dance material, eventually adjusted and stabilized through practice.

2.4. Interim point

Contemporary choreography exhibits a few structural features that are common to several creative processes: it is constraint-driven, multimodal, multi-format, and coordinative. In addition, it exhibits sensorimotor constraints that play a central role, more evidently than in other creative domains. Novel movement emerges not from unconstrained or unbidden invention, but from structured exploration within a space defined by bodily and task-based representational constraints; it is generated through the interaction of representational formats; and it is stabilized through coordinated activity across agents.

On this basis, the introduction of AI systems inserts an additional representational system into an already complex set of constraints, formats, and coordination mechanisms. The question is therefore not whether AI can bring novelty into choreography, but how its contribution interacts with a human intelligence practice by making it even more generative than it already is.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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3. Co-choreographing with AI

Current AI systems used in choreography operate on large datasets of recorded movement (see, e.g., *AISOMA*). Their outputs are generated through statistical learning of sequential patterns, that is, which movement tokens are likely to follow others. As such, they produce coherent recombination of existing material. This coherence is non-trivial: it reflects learned regularities of timing, transition, and spatial organization that are constitutive of choreographic practice. However, it does not amount to deliberate and autonomous creativity. For one, an artificial system does not really *explain* or *justify* its outputs. It does not select among viable alternatives based on justifying reasons or evaluative criteria (e.g., such as aesthetic, affective, or interpretative judgments). In what follows, I lay out a way to conceive of the respective contributions of the human and the artificial systems.

3.1. Human–AI division of choreographic labor

Within choreographic practice, AI outputs mostly function as *proposals*. They introduce candidate sequences into the process, but they do not determine their uptake. Selection, rejection, and adaptation are carried out by human agents who can evaluate, modify, and justify choreographic choices. This division of labor also serves to mitigate the impact of unstable or implausible outputs (analogous to 'hallucinations'), that are filtered out through practice and interaction with the AI.

This proposal-generating role is explicitly reflected in recent choreographic practice. In his collaboration with AI technology, Wayne McGregor developed a system trained on his own choreographic repertoire, capable of generating real-time movement suggestions in the form of predicted sequences. The system produces a continuous stream of possible transitions – visualized through stick-figure projections – that dancers must interpret and enact in real time. As McGregor emphasizes, such systems can generate thousands of possibilities, far exceeding what could be explored in performance, while leaving dancers with the task of making sense of and stabilizing this material within practice. The challenge is precisely that the movement is not exhaustively specified in advance: dancers must respond to unfolding sequences and verify coherence through actual bodily performance. Ultimately, the artificial system does not determine choreographic outputs alone.

An artificial intelligence system may contribute to the choreographic process with what follows:[7]

1. Access to extensive movement datasets;
2. Suggestions for transformation and elaboration of motion;

[7] The current list is likely non-exhaustive and open to additions.

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3. Generation of structurally cohesive sequences (i.e., transitions that are statistically likely to occur);
4. Iterative feedback through interaction with the human intelligence.

On the other side, the human choreographer contributes:

1. Physical testing for executability (either just rehearsed in mental imagery, or actually performed);[8]
2. Affective filtering (e.g., how a movement feels to perform, i.e., its expressive and conative qualities);
3. Stylistic and contextual assessment (overall fit with the work, coherence with prior material);
4. Articulable reasoning (why a transition, rhythm, or spatial pathway is eventually retained or modified).

In this picture, the human choreographer performs cognitively indispensable work: filtering outputs, identifying relevant structure, and assigning reasons to selected movement trajectories. The *AISOMA* example illustrates this division of labor. While the AI system proposes alternative continuations of a movement phrase, the choreographer evaluates their feasibility, expressive quality, and fit within the developing work.

3.2. **Artificial expansion of the choreographic search space**

AI systems expand the search space of choreography by generating a wide range of structurally coherent variations that may not be otherwise produced within a given practice. This expansion has two main advantages. The first is exploratory gain, that is, a rapid production of multiple alternatives across timing, phrasing, and transition patterns. All those alternatives would hardly be represented even by the most skilled dancer or choreographer, for reasons of cognitive load and limited synchronic retrieval of options. The second advantage is structural cohesion, consisting in outputs that respect learned regularities, making them immediately workable rather than random or intractable.

As it happens with other uses of AI beyond dance, the extent and quality of this search expansion importantly depend on prompt design. Effective prompting requires domain-specific knowledge: to obtain non-trivial outputs, the user must encode all information and cues that may meaningfully guide generation. It may indeed be the case that producing distinctive results depends on understanding the domain more deeply than other users (Mollick 2024). In choreography, this translates into informed prompts from a skilled user that steer the system toward more specific regions of the available movement space.[9]

[8] See, e.g., Jeannerod (2006) on the equivalence in timing between mentally simulated and actually executed movements.
[9] Section 5 comes back to the skilled character of the choreographic work.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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3.3. **Interim point**

AI contributes coherent recombination and search-space expansion, but not autonomous creativity. Its outputs acquire choreographic plausibility only through human evaluation, justification, and adaptation. This division of roles establishes the conditions for co-intelligence: a system that generates structured possibilities, and an agent that selects and stabilizes them under their own constraints and reasons. I have so far framed such division of labor in cognitive and representational terms. Novel and creative outputs can be considered the function or purpose of joint representational work.

4. Co-Intelligence and novelty

Choreographic work with AI is best understood as a joint and intelligent enterprise, rather than as the output of either system taken alone. On the assumption that human and artificial intelligences differ – among other things – in the form (or format) of representations they are capable of generating, an account of co-choreography should endorse *format pluralism* with respect to choreographic contents.

4.1. **Cross-format translation**

Typically, AI outputs enter the practice in a format that is not directly executable by a human body: predicted sequences, abstracted kinematics, or simplified visualizations. To become choreographic material, these outputs must be translated from abstract structures to sensorimotor routines, often mediated by linguistic cues or imagistic scaffolds.[10] This translation also serves to fill in parameters (timing, weight, orientation), while suppressing others, and introducing new relations (e.g., phrasing, spatial pathways).

Because each format affords different operations, translation is a site of transformation. A statistically likely transition suggested by the model may be realized as tension, suspension, or redirection depending on how it is embodied and implemented. Conversely, some generated sequences will fail under translation (e.g., unstable balance, infeasible transitions), exposing limitations that may be invisible at the algorithmic level. Novelty arises in these crossings: not from recombination alone, but from how recombined structures are reformatted and implemented in task-based practice.

4.2. **Feasibility scanning**

Selection of representational content is carried out through bodily evaluation. Human agents test candidate sequences against:

[10] On the main formulation of the interface challenge between heterogeneous structures in human cognition (i.e., propositional and non-propositional), I rely on Butterfill and Sinigaglia (2014). Several solutions to the challenge have been put forward since then.

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- ***feasibility*** (can it be physically executed?)
- ***stability*** (does it sustain over time and across repetitions?)
- ***effort and dynamics*** (how does it distribute weight, tension, timing?)
- ***affective salience*** (what it feels like to perform; what it affords expressively)
- ***contextual fit*** (coherence with existing material and task goals)

These criteria are not all readily available to the AI. They function as filters and selectors over the proposal space, converting possibilities into choreographically meaningful choices. Importantly, evaluation is iterative: accepted material is refined, recombined, or rejected upon further testing. This loop (proposal → implementation → assessment → revision) stabilizes sequences that count as choreographic outcomes.

4.3. Coordination without shared representations

In this framework, coordination for the purposes of choreographing does not require shared representations between human and AI intelligences. Rather, it is achieved through alignment under the guidance of:

- ***task goals*** (e.g., what is intended to be achieved, the abstract plan)
- ***transformation rules*** (how outputs may be modified or combined)
- ***public cues*** (counts, spatial markers, notation, marking)
- ***evaluative criteria*** (feasibility, style, affect, coherence)

In a nutshell, AI contributes variation and structure; human agents mostly contribute evaluation and justification. Coordination consists in the division of labor under a shared commitment. For coordination to work, there should be both a shared commitment to the task and responsiveness to each system's constraints. Of course, some constraints might be temporarily unavailable, and not all constraints might be necessary at all stages of the choreographing process. The next section expands on how novel outputs arise at the interface between human and AI systems, and suggests that their co-intelligence can be trained as a distinctive skill.

5. Co-choreographing with AI as a skill

The division of respective contributions from human and AI systems allows us to characterize more precisely the nature of the choreographic process and its outputs. Compared to non-assisted choreography, co-choreographic processes can yield greater variability in terms of outputs. By expanding the search space and introducing structured variation, AI enables practitioners to encounter possibilities that would be unlikely to emerge through unaided exploration. At the same time, the need to interpret and stabilize these possibilities imposes additional demands on the choreographer, requiring sustained engagement with potentially unfamiliar material.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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The ability to produce choreography with AI can thus be understood as a distinctive and *trainable skill*, rather than as a by-product of either human creativity or machine output. In a study conducted on expert breakdancers, Shimizu and Okada (2018) show that the hallmarks of expert performers' development of skill are the degree of skill acquisition, the contents or knowledge included in practice, and the dancers' stated purposes for practicing. In a similar vein, philosophers of mind have characterized skilled action via several interrelated features, including goal-directed control, sensitivity to feedback and norms, and the capacity for improvement through practice (cf. Fridland and Pavese 2020; Kind 2020).

Co-choreographing with AI broadly satisfies these criteria. First, co-choreographic activity is *goal-directed*: practitioners work under task constraints and artistic objectives that guide the generation and selection of movement. However, unlike standard cases of individual skill, the control of action is distributed, at least in part, in the joint activity. The generation of candidate sequences is delegated to the system, while the human agent retains control over evaluation, transformation, and stabilization. Skill, in this context, consists in managing the division of labor effectively. Second, co-choreography exhibits systematic *sensitivity to feedback*. AI-generated outputs are continuously tested against bodily, stylistic, and contextual criteria, and the results of this evaluation feed back into both prompt design and subsequent selection. This iterative loop (generation, testing, revision) mirrors core features of skilled performance, but extends them across human and artificial contributions. Third, co-choreographic practice is, in some way, *norm-governed*. Movement sequences are not merely produced but assessed according to standards of feasibility, coherence, aesthetics, and fit within a developing work. These standards or norms are supplied and enforced by the human practitioner, but are also shaped by AI-generated material. Skill involves the capacity to keep up with the choreographic exploration, while applying such norms. Fourth, co-choreographing is *learnable and improvable*. Practitioners may develop expertise in prompt design, in recognizing structure within generated outputs, and in efficiently navigating large spaces of possibilities. As in other domains of skilled action, performance improves with experience: expert users are better able to extract non-trivial material, avoid generic outputs, and stabilize novel movement sequences.

These features indicate that co-choreography is not reducible to either machine creativity or a simple extension of human choreographic skill. What can be trained is how to formulate effective prompts, recognize when generated material is worth pursuing, test and adapt material through coordinated practice, and transform it into stable choreographic outputs.

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6. Toward a cognitive grammar of co-choreography

The internal coherence of dance depends on its movement vocabulary and syntax (Foster 1986). The present account suggests that, in AI-assisted choreography, identifying any such a syntax is considerably more challenging since choreographic material is generated and transformed across heterogeneous representational formats and systems before being stabilized in executable form. In particular, the actual interaction between different intelligences is possible insofar as representations are able to coordinate and to be manipulated by the joint work. To better explain the relevance of the cognitive underpinnings of AI-assisted choreography, we should therefore consider the possibility of individuating a representational syntax for co-choreographing as the backbone of a semiotic account of co-choreography.[11]

However, there are at least two major obstacles to defining a single representational grammar for the task of co-representing and co-creating choreography. First, we would need a definitive account of mixed-format human cognition, which we currently lack. Second, in AI-assisted choreography, the continuous feedback between human and artificial systems introduces a high degree of representational instability: generated sequences are constantly transformed, embodied, and modified, making it difficult to stabilize unfolding structures as persistent symbols. In many cases, such stabilization occurs only when movement is fixed in a performable and repeatable action representation.

One strategy is that of elaborating a functional account of representations for co-choreographing. The idea would be that coordination in mental structures – even when arising from different intelligence systems – is realized by sharing the same task-goal. If my hypothesis is correct, novelty in co-choreography emerges through the interaction of systems that do not necessarily share an identical representational basis, but are coordinated by means of shared practice.

7. Conclusions

This paper has argued that choreographic novelty in AI-assisted contexts does not arise from either human creativity or machine generation taken in isolation, but from their coordinated work. This account has two broader implications. First, it contends that co-choreographing with AI constitutes a distinctive and trainable skill, grounded in the ability to co-work with AI systems. Second, the account proposed here suggests that understanding AI-assisted choreography requires explaining not only how choreographic signs acquire meaning, but also how heterogeneous representational systems become coordinated in the first place. This cognitive architecture might provide one possible foundation for a future semiotics of co-choreography with AI.

[11] Compare Kruk (2022) arguing that bodily movement is simultaneously a physical event and a signifying event.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
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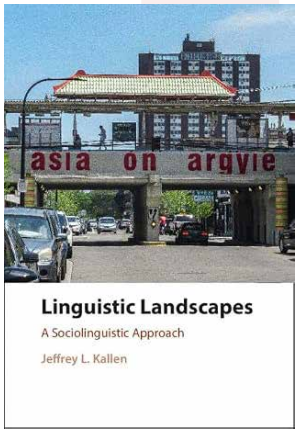
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Investigating the sociolinguistics of linguistic landscapes: A discourse perspective

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BY: **Costas Canakis**



Jeffrey L. Kallen

Linguistic Landscapes: A Sociolinguistic Approach

London & New York, Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. xxvi + 350, ISBN 9781107177543 (hardback), ISBN 9781316628430 (paperback), ISBN 9781316822807 (epub), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316822807

Jeffrey Kallen's book is one of the few monographs in the field of Linguistic/Semiotic Landscapes (henceforth LL) to date and it comes as a very welcome addition to the literature at a time of significant expansion which warrants the relevance of a detailed account of LLs from a sociolinguistic perspective. Prof. Kallen's book is remarkable in its breadth of coverage and detailed discussion of major questions which have shaped LL research. The author puts these in historical perspective while underscoring the discourse functions of LL units and the interaction they afford among sign instigators and sign viewers as a core sociolinguistic aspect, at a time when LL research is becoming progressively eclectic and engages in dialogue with a variety of disciplines (cf. Tufi 2025) breaking new ground.

The book consists of a preface, eight chapters, a list of references, and an extensive index. Moreover, it is one of the few books of its kind with abundant photographic documentation, which allows the author to engage in detailed discussion of his data. In what follows, I will take up each chapter in turn and provide a brief overview.

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The first chapter (*Approaching the Linguistic Landscape*) begins by looking at LL units both as linguistic expressions and text-bearing objects and further distinguishes between text signs performing speech acts (i.e. signs which constitute LL units) and text signs which do not perform speech acts and are not, strictly speaking, part of the LL. This distinction highlights the importance of the pragmatic status of signs and underpins the author's view of LL units as performing acts of discourse (p. 16). Moreover, he cautions us that there may be both written and oral components in the LL, especially in rural areas, and shows how layering of past and present LLs may result in extensive LL systems (p. 23, cf. Dressler and Hult 2025). The author aptly uses Stolpersteine, the brass rectangular plaques inscribed with names of victims of the Nazi regime, to claim that these commemorative LL units in contemporary Germany engage viewers in a discourse with cultural and social relevance (p. 24ff). The discussion of discoursal aspects of LL units runs through the book as a cohesive device and informs the author's approach to a rich set of data.

Chapter two (*Why Linguistic Landscape?*) problematizes 'the roots of the LL notion which give it a distinctive quality that is especially relevant to sociolinguistics' (p. 28). To this effect, the author draws a distinction between use of the term linguistic landscape and LL as a distinctive field of research and suggests that work relating to the public display of language far predates what we typically consider as formative works (e.g., Landry and Bourhis 1997). He revisits the development of the field as we know it, looking as far back as antiquity, and drawing on work from a variety of sources in-between, before LLs solidified in the late 1990s. This development was underpinned by pragmatic considerations which include – but are not limited to – language policy and community identity (p. 42). The last section (2.2) outlines a genealogy of terms which have been used in researching public signage in English and French, reflecting various traditions and drawing on a variety of sources.

In the third chapter (*Doing Things with Codes*), Kallen engages with how sign instigators use codes in meaningful ways (cf. Peck et al. 2018). He approaches this topic by looking at the 'ways in which sign instigators (1) choose and display codes; (2) map between the content of messages and code choices; (3) manipulate codes for cross-linguistic and intralinguistic effects; and (4) integrate linguistic codes with non-linguistic visual signifiers' (p. 51). This is a tall order, since the author attempts an integration of linguistic and non-linguistic visual signifiers, while taking into consideration translanguaging, interlanguaging, and word play as semiotic affordances and drawing on indexicality (Eckert 2008) as a key concept in code choice. This demanding chapter is diligently and cogently illustrated with data featuring various alphabets and other visual semiotic resources, such as brand-name logos. The author claims that the accomplishment of communicative goals is the major motivation of LL actors and these goals may 'transcend or ignore language boundaries' (p. 68). Moreover, the integration of texts with visual images enhances the sociolinguistic relevance of LL, as it provides insights into the social life of language (p. 77, cf. Blommaert 2013; Blommaert and Maly 2014).

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Chapter four (*Space and Landscape*) deals with space as the physical aspect of LLs and focuses on the spatial relationships of LL units. The author argues that LL units should not be understood as simply occupying space, but rather 'as elements of discourse whose physical and referential properties […] create spatial relationships' (p. 80). This point is in keeping with contemporary understandings of space as much more than a background for the emplacement of signs, which has enhanced the social relevance of LL research. The author discusses space both in physical terms and as an index of social life, while underscoring its relation to discourse. He problematizes the view of public space based on the container metaphor and discusses landscape from an etymological perspective. The discussion of indexicality (section 4.3) is informed by the pragmatics of deixis and the deictic field and helps anchor the treatment of emplacement effects which are crucial in LLs. The discussion of spatial relationships pertains both to the regulation of space and to spatial reference (with proximal space being prevalent without, however, neglecting reference to remote or imaginary spaces).

Chapter five *(People)* focuses on sign instigators and viewers, and the discourse they engage in with LL units as the medium and develops 'a model of social indexicality in the LL which pays particular attention to the social value of communicative choices' (p. 126, cf. Silverstein 2003); these choices are considered from the perspective of linguistic markedness and the affordances of the code used. The main point is that social indexicality in LLs is not predetermined by sociopolitical institutions but emerges through the discourse afforded by LL units between LL actors (i.e., sign instigators and viewers). LLs may index codes and people (p. 124); however, one should be careful in interpreting both presences and absences in the LL as directly indexing individuals or communities who use a code conversationally (p. 128, 134). The chapter covers issues pertaining to ethnic and immigrant communities as well as population flows relating to tourism, and its focus on people drives home the discourse approach to the LL proposed by the author, which is further developed in the next chapter.

In the sixth chapter (*The Linguistic Landscape as Discourse*), the author approaches 'the potential for the LL as a whole to be understood as a multitude of discourses' (p. 164) and suggests that such an endeavor should start by exploiting the LL as performance, in the sense of Hymes, and by looking into with the pragmatic force of utterances (p. 51). Kallen discusses various genres of LL discourses and their particular ways of being performed and recognized through LL signage: from enticing the viewer to buy certain products and services in advertising discourse to regulatory genres such as directions and LL conversations evolving intertextually in protest signage (p. 173ff, cf. Canakis and Martín Rojo to appear). He suggests that '[s]ince the knowledge of practices relating to face-to-face conversation is part of the shared knowledge of interlocutors in the LL, it can in itself form a new point of reference for LL units' (p. 176), which further corroborates his view of LL units as initiating discourse. The author concludes by stressing the multiplicity, indeed the networks,

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of discourses, afforded both by single LL units and LL assemblages (p. 210ff), and claims that studying LLs essentially involves focusing on a slice of a greater, complex system which is, nonetheless, intelligible.

The seventh chapter (*Time, Space, and the LL*) is devoted to time and space considerations in inscribing, viewing, and investigating LLs. Kallen claims that 'a general characteristic of the LL unit is that it performs a speech act in the sign viewer's present by displaying an act of writing that occurred in the past' (p. 218), instantiating the THEN IS NOW metaphor. Chronotopic considerations of the emplacement of LL units and assemblages are linked to LL remnants (p. 228ff) and layering (p. 232ff, cf), which have attracted more attention in the field, following the semiotic turn (cf. Jaworski and Thurlow 2010). Memorialization (section 7.5) is one such aspect of the relevance of chronotopic anchoring of LL units (Blackwood and Macalister 2021). On the other hand, the section on repurposing the past (7.6) can be fruitfully linked to the process of resemioticization, a major affordance of LL units which allows them to bridge – and function across – contexts.

The last chapter (*Researching Linguistic Landscapes*) revisits the main points explored in the book and proposes a view of LL research informed by a discourse perspective and relying on pragmatic considerations. Questions of methodology and documentation (cf. Buchstaller and Alvanides 2025), such as the use of photography as evidence, are critically evaluated, and problems of representing LLs in other media are discussed, especially given the offline-online nexus distinction (p. 286ff) which is progressively attracting more attention (Androutsopoulos 2024). Looking towards the future, the author justifiably notes that while geographical coverage of LL is progressing in strides, there are still many places which we know little or nothing about. Temporally speaking, Kallen suggests that 'LL research has a great deal of catching up to do in order to give an account of the life of the LL in society' (p. 301) and calls for engaging with LLs from a historical perspective. Materially speaking, the author encourages a sharper focus on a variety of portable (and often commodifiable) LL objects in juxtaposition to fixed terrestrial LL units. Finally, ethnographically speaking, he claims that LL research is not about photographic documentation or counting codes but 'about probing the knowledge and cultural practices of people who create and engage in the discourse of the LL' (p. 302, cf. Lou 2017).

Prof. Kallen has written a remarkable book, which is indispensable reading for anyone engaged in LL research. By looking at LL units as emplaced discourse he outlines a discourse approach to the LL which is both complex and impressive in its breadth of coverage and engagement with the relevant literature. This is one of the few monographs in the field (most developments in which are published in collected volumes, handbooks, and journal articles, cf. e.g. Blackwood et al. 2024; Gorter and Cenoz 2025) and can be used both as an introduction for students and as a reference-work for

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researchers. For many of us the book will be helpful in revisiting old questions from a new perspective. A lot of the well-chosen examples provided have to do with LLs in which policy-related issues are paramount. This reflects the author's own interests and his long-time involvement in the field. On occasion the reader may feel the detail provided in some discussions is overwhelming, but this is a matter of opinion and so is that some issues – such as chronotopicity (Blommaert 2015), reflexivity (Patiño-Santos 2019), vulnerability (Moriarty and Kosatica 2025), and autoethnography (Peck 2024; Tufi and Peck 2025) – could have been more extensively discussed.

Yet none of this detracts from this impressive and erudite scholarly work.

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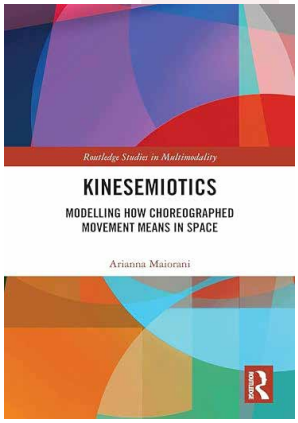
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Grammar on pointe: Steps toward a semiotics of choreographed space

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BY: **Valeria De Luca**



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

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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 semiotic 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

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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

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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.

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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.

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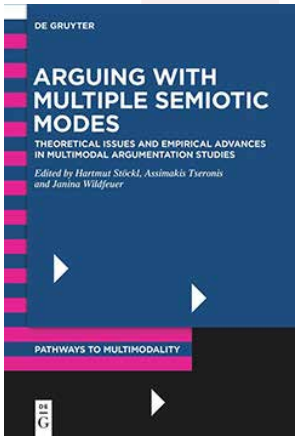
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Literacy in the age of multimodal argumentation

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BY: **Georgios Damaskinidis**



Walter de Gruyter

Arguing with Multiple Semiotic Modes: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Advances in Multimodal Argumentation Studies

Stöckl, Hartmut, Assimakis Tseronis, and Janina Wildfeuer (eds.) 2026, vol. 2. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH/De Gruyter Brill, vi + 372 pp. Open-access PDF (CC BY 4.0; ISBN 978-3-11-222117-4); print ISBN 978-3-11-914424-7; EPUB ISBN 978-3-11-222129-7. DOI: 10.1515/9783112221174.

1. Overview

This collection examines how arguments are produced when language operates with images, sound, bodily movement, layout, symbols, and even smell. The editors position the volume at the intersection of argumentation theory, rhetoric, pragmatics, social semiotics, and multimodality studies. Their central claim is not simply that nonverbal signs can persuade, but that they can contribute identifiable content and structure to arguments. The task, therefore, is to reconstruct and evaluate arguments without reducing every mode to a verbal paraphrase or ignoring the distinctive affordances of each semiotic resource (Stöckl, Tseronis, and Wildfeuer 2026).

The collection contains fourteen chapters arranged in three parts. Part I develops theoretical and methodological proposals; Part II tests methods on social media videos, crowdfunding pitches, environmental protest, sound, and advertising; Part III examines Pride advertising, digital news, student comics, editorial cartoons, and olfactory evidence in law. This architecture moves from foundational disputes to analytical

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procedures and then to domain-specific applications. Although the chapters differ in theoretical vocabulary and evidential scale, they share a commitment to treating real communicative artefacts as integrated combinations of modes rather than as verbal arguments decorated with images or sound.

2. Evaluation

The volume's most important achievement is its sustained challenge to the verbalist assumptions that have historically shaped argumentation studies. Leo Groarke's opening chapter provides the clearest philosophical statement of this challenge. By expanding an epistemological account of propositions so that visual and other nonverbal forms can make assessable claims, he retains logic's concern with truth and inference while widening the range of materials that logic can analyze. This is a strategically effective opening because it addresses the objection that images may influence attitudes but cannot genuinely argue. The chapter also establishes the collection's broader ethical urgency: manipulated images, deepfakes, and highly edited audiovisual messages can advance false or defective arguments even when their inferential force is not expressed in sentences.

Subsequent chapters do not settle on one universal method, and this is both a strength and a limitation. Jean Wagemans develops the Multimodal Argument Type Identification Procedure, which seeks to aggregate cross-modal reference and predication without first translating nonverbal material into language. Hartmut Stöckl proposes a three-tier heuristic involving modal reach, multimodal coherence, and discourse structure, grounding the model in a corpus of plastic-pollution advertisements. Jan Albert Van Laar, by contrast, adopts dialogue theory to explain how multimodal messages can manipulate audiences by suppressing information needed for critical scrutiny. Together these chapters demonstrate that multimodal argumentation is not one analytical problem but a cluster of related problems: identifying propositions, assigning argumentative functions, modelling relations among modes, reconstructing implicit premises, and evaluating reasonableness or manipulation.

This plurality is intellectually honest and appropriate for an emerging interdisciplinary field. The editors explicitly acknowledge the absence of a common metalanguage and call for greater engagement among competing frameworks. They also recognise the need for corpus research, reception experiments, clearer analytical criteria, and stronger connections with semiotics, rhetoric, and pragmatics. Such self-reflexivity is a major virtue. Rather than presenting the volume as a completed theory, they identify its chapters as provisional advances and state that analysts occupy a position of evaluative privilege that carries ideological responsibility. The introduction therefore displays awareness of methodological positionality, especially the assumptions involved in deciding what counts as an argument and which reconstruction is considered plausible.

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The reflexivity is less developed at the level of socio-cultural and institutional positionality. Contributors work across several countries and disciplines, and the collection includes research from South Africa, China, Canada, and multiple European contexts. Nevertheless, most research topics concern Western commercial, political, legal, or social-media environments. The volume rarely asks whether culturally specific habits of viewing, listening, embodiment, or sensory classification might influence an analyst's reconstruction. Context and genre are treated as indispensable constraints, but culture is more often represented as shared background knowledge than as a contested and unequal resource. A more sustained engagement with indigenous, non-Western, multilingual, and disability perspectives would have tested whether the proposed categories travel across communicative contexts and traditions.

The empirical chapters are especially valuable for showing what is gained when analysts attend to modes that verbal reconstruction usually marginalizes. Janina Wildfeuer's analysis of three LifeVac videos combines multimodal discourse semantics, pragma-dialectics, and the Argumentum Model of Topics. It demonstrates how instruction, narrative, and argument can unfold simultaneously across speech, action, captions, editing, and visual demonstration. The analysis is technically demanding, but it captures an important feature of short-form digital communication: conclusions are often distributed across a sequence rather than stated in a single unit. Maciej Grzenkowicz and Gabrijela Kišiček similarly show that sound can function as a premise in TikTok ad hominem attacks, distinguishing sonic stereotypes from character representations. Their typology is useful for analysing political ridicule because reused sounds import histories and associations that are not recoverable from transcripts alone.

The chapter on multimodal argumentation in crowdfunding campaigns, by Rudi Palmieri, Sabrina Mazzali-Lurati, Dimitris Sarafis, Chiara Mercuri and Kay O'Halloran, offers another example of strong interdisciplinary synthesis. Its three-level procedure entails connecting rhetorical segments, intersemiotic relations, and argument structures in four Kickstarter videos. The finding that successful campaigns integrate verbal and visual materials to frame products as enabling desirable social experiences is plausible and pedagogically useful. The authors are cautious, however, about generalizing from a purposive sample of four campaigns. This caution highlights a recurring weakness across the collection: many chapters rely on one case or a very small sample. While generating crucial hypotheses and demonstrating rich analytical possibilities, such studies cannot establish the frequency, reception, or comparative effectiveness of the patterns identified.

Yutong Ji's chapter, "The Merits of the Toulmin Argumentation Model for the Analysis of Visual Arguments," adds a more explicit bridge between reconstruction and evaluation. Using three print advertisements – the Colorado State Patrol tailgating billboard, a ŠKODA Superb advertisement, and Greenpeace's "Save the Arctic" campaign – Ji tests whether Toulmin's distinctions among claim, data, warrant, backing,

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qualifier, and rebuttal can account for the argumentative work of visual images, visual symbols, and visual metaphors. The comparison with Groarke's Key Components Table is productive: Ji argues that a premise-conclusion representation can obscure functional differences among argumentative elements and does not adequately capture the dialectical tier, whereas Toulmin's model makes inferential warrants, degrees of commitment, supporting assumptions, and possible objections visible. At the same time, the chapter exposes the interpretive burden of multimodal reconstruction. Backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals are not necessarily encoded in the advertisement itself and may depend on audience experience, historical context, and field-specific knowledge. The chapter therefore strengthens the volume while also exemplifying one of its central methodological tensions: richer reconstruction can produce greater explanatory precision, but only by making the analyst's contextual inferences more consequential.

The editors acknowledge this limitation and advocate systematic annotation, larger corpora, and experimental research. That acknowledgement does not remove the problem but places it within a coherent research agenda. Future studies should test inter-analyst reliability, because multimodal reconstruction frequently depends on inferred premises, assumed genre knowledge, and interpretations of salience. They should also investigate audience response rather than equating a theoretically plausible reconstruction with actual comprehension or persuasion. Isabel Alonso-Belmonte and M. Dolores Porto model this restraint particularly well in their chapter on newsbites, repeatedly distinguishing persuasive potential from demonstrated persuasive effect. Their framework links newsmakers, multimodal framing, intertextual sequences, and audiences' cognitive environments, while avoiding claims that the degree of persuasion can be read directly from the artefact.

Organization is one of the book's strongest features. The three-part division is congruent with its purpose, and the introduction provides a detailed map of how chapters address theory, reconstruction, evaluation, genre, and context. The diversity of cases prevents multimodality from becoming a synonym for visual communication. Moving images, vocal qualities, bodily action, colour, layout, metaphor, symbols, and smell all receive attention. Marko Novak's highly original discussion of olfactory evidence and trademarks in legal argument exposes the legal system's dependence on verbal description when the relevant evidence is sensory and difficult to reproduce. Even where smell may not satisfy every definition of a fully organised mode, the chapter usefully reveals that legal reasoning is already multimodal whenever courts translate sensory experience into testimony and doctrine. Eveline Feteris, on the other hand, highlights how the editorial cartoonists' multimodal metaphors 'strategically maneouvre' their way through the genre's conventions and political opinions.

At times, however, the collection's conceptual density impedes accessibility. Readers must navigate informal logic, pragma-dialectics, the Argumentum Model

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of Topics, social semiotics, rhetorical theory, discourse semantics, and cognitive approaches. Individual chapters generally define their terms, yet the same phenomena are represented through different diagrams and terminologies. The absence of a comparative glossary, synthesis table, or final editorial conclusion make it harder to determine where the models genuinely conflict, where they are complementary, and which method suits a particular research question. The introduction performs some comparative work, but an ending chapter could have assessed the volume's findings after the empirical analyses rather than leaving the synthesis to the reader.

The scholarship is rigorous within the conventions of a state-of-the-field edited volume. Chapters engage extensively with prior research, explain their analytical procedures, reproduce relevant artefacts, and acknowledge evidential limits. The strongest contributions make explicit why a selected mode matters to the argument rather than merely describing its presence. Hartmut Stöckl's emphasis on nonredundancy and coherence, for example, provides a criterion for showing that an image contributes information unavailable in the words. Lotte Van Poppel's treatment of climate activists' bodily movements similarly demonstrates that gluing a hand to a wall does not simply attract attention; it performs commitment, sacrifice, and witness within the protest's argumentative event. These analyses advance the field beyond impressionistic claims that multimodal texts are persuasive because they are vivid or emotional.

Nevertheless, evaluation remains less developed than reconstruction. The volume repeatedly succeeds in showing how an argument may be distributed across modes, but it is less consistent in determining whether the reconstructed argument is logically strong, ethically acceptable, or effective for audiences. Jan Albert Van Laar's chapter on manipulation and the discussions of rainbow washing, media framing, and ad hominem sound directly address normative questions. Elsewhere, evaluation often stops after the analyst has assigned claims, premises, warrants, or contextual assumptions. This imbalance reflects a broader difficulty: once nonverbal signs are translated into argumentative roles, the richness of their affective, aesthetic, and embodied force may be subordinated to a verbal diagram. The collection recognises this danger but does not fully solve it. Ji's chapter is a significant partial exception: its use of qualifiers and rebuttals turns audience objections and the defensibility of warrants into explicit components of reconstruction rather than leaving evaluation entirely outside the diagram.

Gender, sexuality, race, class, and other dimensions of difference receive uneven attention. The Pride advertising chapter by Emma van Bijnen and Menno H. Reijven offers a careful distinction between symbolic affiliation and materially supported LGBTQ+ advocacy, showing that a rainbow symbol alone cannot protect a brand from accusations of opportunism. The news chapter analyses ideological framing around Giorgia Meloni, abortion, Catholicism, and the European far right. Arlene Archer and Chen-Wen Huang's study of a student-produced comic at a South African university

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is the collection's strongest engagement with educational inequality. It argues that conventional essay literacy can reproduce unequal access and that alternative genres may recognise students' existing semiotic resources.

These chapters make difference relevant to argumentation rather than adding it as a supplementary theme. Yet race and class do not organise the volume's central theoretical discussion, and questions of access to technology, platform labour, algorithmic visibility, language hierarchy, and sensory disability remain largely peripheral. This omission matters because semiotic resources are not equally available or equally valued. A learner with limited bandwidth, a visually impaired audience member, or a multilingual adult may encounter a multimodal argument differently from the idealised interpreter presumed by a model. Incorporating accessibility and political economy would strengthen the claim that context determines argumentative meaning.

3. Contribution to multimodal literacy

Arguing with Multiple Semiotic Modes is recommended for advanced students, researchers, and educators in argumentation, applied linguistics, rhetoric, media studies, communication, law, digital literacy, and higher or adult education. This is not an introductory textbook: its theoretical range and specialised diagrams require prior familiarity with discourse analysis or argumentation. It would work best on a graduate level, where selected chapters could be paired with practical analysis of advertisements, news posts, political videos, public-health messages, or learner-produced media. In this sense, the book offers an advanced manual for critical literacy in the new age of multimodal public communication.

We increasingly encounter public arguments through interfaces that combine headlines, images, music, gesture, editing, typography, and platform conventions. Critical literacy therefore requires more than checking verbal claims. Learners must recognise how modes divide persuasive labour, how implicit premises are cued, how emotion and salience guide inference, and how genre expectations make some interpretations appear natural. The editors' call for "argument checking" alongside fact checking provides a useful educational objective: adults should be able to examine not only whether information is true, but also whether the multimodal pathway from evidence to conclusion is warranted.

At the same time, the volume can support productive practice. Adult learners can redesign a written argument as a comic, short video, infographic, or presentation, then explain what each mode contributes and what may be lost. Educators can use the manipulation framework to analyse political advertising, the newsbite framework to study cumulative framing, and the Pride chapter to discuss the difference between symbolic inclusion and accountable institutional action. Archer and Huang's chapter

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is valuable for inclusive pedagogy because it treats multimodal composition as intellectually rigorous knowledge production rather than a simplified alternative to writing. Ji's Toulmin-based analysis is especially adaptable to teaching: learners can map claims, data, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals across image and text, then distinguish what is explicitly represented from what must be inferred through genre, field knowledge, and audience assumptions.

Overall, the editors accomplish their principal objective: they demonstrate that argumentation studies must engage seriously with multimodality and that multimodality studies need explicit accounts of inference, standpoint, and evaluation. The book's methodological plurality, empirical originality, and candid account of unfinished work make it a substantial contribution. Its main weaknesses – small samples, terminological multilinguism, limited audience research, and uneven attention to structural differences – are significant but generative. They define the next phase of inquiry rather than invalidating the project which is nothing less than cultivating effective literacy skills for the whole wide range of contemporary multimodal public communication.

AUTHOR

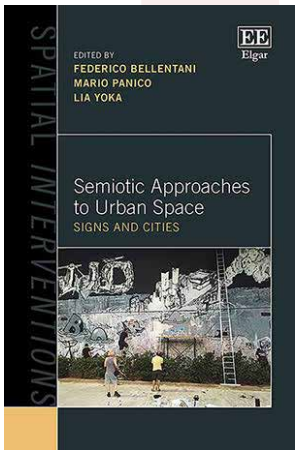
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Signposts for a renovated urban semiotics

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BY: **Ilias G. Spyridonidis**



Federico Bellentani, Mario Panico and Lia Yoka

Semiotic Approaches to Urban Space

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 306 pp., £110.70 (hbk, ISBN 9781800887213), £25.00 (ebook, ISBN 9781800887220).

This engrossing collection of studies edited by Federico Bellentani, Mario Panico and Lia Yoka, is dedicated to Pierre Pellegrino (1947–2022), a pioneering figure of the semiotics of space and long-time President of the Association Internationale de Sémiotique de l'Espace. Right from the beginning, the editors clarify that this book 'is not a handbook of urban semiotics. It does not intend to fill in the gaps of some neatly circumscribed debate, nor to comprehensively define every aspect of urban semiotic theory and methodology and their applications.' They propose it, instead, as a volume 'aspir[ing] to capture the echo of the current polyphony' of different approaches in urban and space semiotics and to reposition urban semiotics as an interdisciplinary field. The editors emphasize correctly that studying the city from a semiotic point of view 'entails confronting space as a *syncretic text*, in which multiple languages interact,' producing more than a 'single correct signification' as a result of different perceptions. The volume has a tripartite structure, dividing its contents into concepts, models, and activations. This functional organization reflects each contrubution's 'primary emphasis on semiotic theory, methodology or application techniques' thus providing a solid framework to conceptualize the diverse approaches to urban semiotics.

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In their introduction, the editors review the rise and evolution of urban semiotics and discuss at length its most recent trends and developments. Most usefully, they accompany this with an up to date and comprehensive bibliographical documentation of the field. The specific field of *urban semiotics* was inaugurated by Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) and subsequently enriched by Umberto Eco (1986, 1997), Lotman (1987), Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou (2014) and Pellegrino (2010, 2020).

The first, relatively more theoretical part, dedicated to 'concepts,'opens with Alexandros Lagopoulos' study on the semiotics of settlement places, which elucidates the crucial terminological difference between the notion of the geographical material space and the semiotic place. Gianfranco Marrone in "Ten theses for a semiotic study of the city: notes, observations, proposals," circumscribes the semiotic study of the city by defining its precise object and proposing a compelling list of theoretical theses. In "Devices for the representation and the spectacularisation of urban space: views, landscapes and logo-monuments," Isabella Pezzini examines how the map representations of the city form a kind of "portrait of the city." Olga Lavrenova in "Urban landscape as text," considers the urban and cultural landscape as text that can be studied as a sign system offering an interdisciplinary perspective for reading the city. Francesco Mazzucchelli in "The complexity of cities and the semiotic gaze: keeping the 'thickness' of urban spaces" illustrates how this 'thickness' is dealt with through Gianfranco Marrone's sociosemiotic and discursive approach and by Francesco Marsciani's ethnosemiotic approach.

The second part is dedicated to "models." Revisiting settlement spaces, Alexandros Lagopoulos discusses the semiotic modeling of space in three precapitalist societies – ancient India, ancient Greece and the Dogon of southern Mali – as well as in contemporary modernist and the postmodern societies. In "Dynamics of madrasa learning institutions in the Ayyubid and Mamluk capital cities" Manar Hammad explores the contemporary resemanticizations of the Islamic mandrasa schools across the Arabic world. Leonid Tchertov analyses the "Mental models of urban space and their semiotic means," highlighting the interaction of spatial codes with other semiotic systems. Charikleia Pantelidou in "Reworking boundaries: from gates to the architecture of openness" discusses how architectural theory can move beyond conceptual dualisms like the boundedness/openness opposition. Finally, in "Semiotic space for native biota in the City," Riin Magnus, Tiit Remm and Kalevi Kull explore the semiotic significance of native biodiversity in an urban environment

The third part of the book, dedicated to 'activations,' opens with Massimo Leone's "Envisaging the city: roadmap for an interdisciplinary study of urban 'facescapes,'" which offers a qualitative methodology to analyse 'the faces with which a city presents itself.' Both Pierluigi Cervelli's "Spatial practices: convergences and

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dialogues between semiotics and urban planning" and Mariusz Czepczyński's "Re-semiotisation of urban landscapes: relational geographies and signification processes in post-socialist cities," offer powerful evidence of the need to understand spatial practices through an ethnosemiotic lens that prioritizes 'incorporated knowledges' and the 'relationality of space.' In "When schools intersect the everyday world of the city: educational space as a dialogical-transformative quality of the urban," Kyriaki Tsoukala relates school design with the city in a socially transformative perspective. A similar perspective infuses Nikolaos-Ion Terzoglou's study of the semiotics of socially responsible design in "Urban activated public spaces in the contemporary city." Finally, Mattia Thibault, Vincenzo Idone Cassone and Gabriele Ferri in "*Metropoesis*: semiotics, fictional cities and speculative urban design" discuss three case studies of cities that serve as the basis for a typology of the ways we envisage our urban futures.

This collection of studies constitutes a major intervention in Urban Semiotics by synthesizing Saussurean, Greimasian, Tartu–Moscow School, Peircean, sociosemiotic, ecosemiotic, and biosemiotic traditions. Comprising a balanced combination of theoretical elaborations and empirical case studies, it opens new horizons for urban semiotics by advancing its interdisciplinary collaboration with urban studies, architecture, geography, planning, memory studies and cultural studies. In this way, it marks a significant milestone for future research in this field.

Semiotic Approaches to Urban Space represents the most comprehensive attempt in nearly four decades to consolidate Urban Semiotics as a mature, pluralistic, and interdisciplinary research field, enriched with the problematics of ecosemiotics, biosemiotics, digital urbanism, and spatial practices. It effectively reflects the transition of urban semiotics into a new phase of disciplinary maturity, whereby it converses not only with architecture and planning, but also with urban culture, city identity, public memory, digital mediation, ecology and urban futures. In this sense, the volume offers both a synthesis of four decades of scholarship and a compelling agenda for future research.

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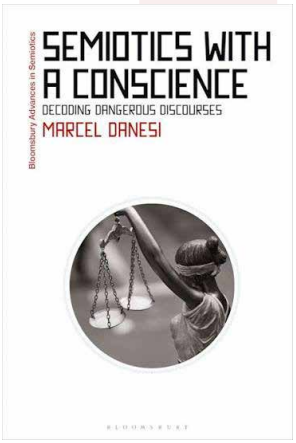
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Dark Semiotics

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BY: **Keith M. Murphy**



Marcel Danesi

Semiotics with a Conscience: Decoding Dangerous Discourses

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 192 pp. $ 39.95 (pbk, ISBN 9781350362123), $ 135 (hbk, ISBN 9781350362086).

The book *Semiotics with a Conscience: Decoding Dangerous Discourses* by Marcel Danesi is vexing. In terms of its topic, it's very timely, and delineates a real and pressing problem. In terms of its execution, however, it consistently misses the mark. There are some redeeming qualities to the book that might make it a worthwhile read for completists seeking to cite everything in the realm of semiotics and misinformation (given the author's status and the book's appearance in a well-known series, it's destined to be one of that realm's central texts). But anyone in need of useful methodologies, innovative theory, or a good resource for teaching semiotics would be better served somewhere else.

The premise of the book is more or less presaged in its title. The world is awash in what Danesi calls 'dangerous discourses' – misinformation, conspiracy theories, Big Lies, and visual symbols of hate, for example – and one way to analyze these discourses, and to combat them, is through the careful deployment of semiotics. The preface and first chapter lay the groundwork for approaching semiotics as explicitly ethical (which, the author acknowledges, has not historically been a common way to describe the field) and establishing the analytic vocabulary relied on in the rest of the book. The second chapter does some work to illuminate both overlaps

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and distinctions between different semiotic forms used in dangerous discourses, like text, abstract symbols, and visual imagery. The following three chapters purport to focus on distinct types of dangerous discourses: denials, big lies, and false narratives. Finally, the book's last chapter tries to offer a positive vision for what a future 'semiotics with a conscience' approach might be.

On the surface, this all seems agreeable enough. Dangerous discourses are a big problem; semiotics *can* help us better understand them; and we likely *should* make stronger arguments that showcase semiotics in an ethical light. That said, beyond simply forwarding the case that all of this is so, *Semiotics with a Conscience* doesn't do much else to lead us in new directions – or, really, anyplace at all. There are two main reasons for this, as I see it. First, the book suffers from a collection of small issues that together weigh it down inexorably; second, a single larger problem sits at its center, essentially functioning as the book's fatal flaw.

The small issues are, in themselves, irritating but not ruinous. For example, the text can be distractingly repetitive. Sometimes this manifests explicitly at the paragraph level. In Chapter 4, for instance, Danesi ends one sentence with the phrase 'disastrous for Sicily' and then follows it directly with a quote ending with 'a disastrous one for Sicily.' Two pages later he uses the phrase 'infested by vermin and rats' and then 'filthy and infested by vermin' in the very next line. In Chapter 5, Danesi quotes from Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, then four pages later uses the same quote – modified and not cited – as if it hadn't appeared just a few pages earlier. Compositional quirks like these can be chalked up to lax editing, of course, but the repetition continues at other levels. The book is riddled with anaphoric signposts like 'as mentioned' and 'as discussed,' subtly marking how often ideas and examples are recycled. But perhaps the most noticeable repetition is the persistent reliance on three specific authors – Hitler, Machiavelli, and Orwell – who are credulously called upon as either expert practitioners of dark semiotics (Hitler and Machiavelli) or virtuoso analysts of the form (Machiavelli and Orwell). There is, of course, nothing wrong with substantially relying on a small group of writers or texts to build one's argument. However, a problem emerges here when those writers are invoked not because they offer any semiotic insight, but because they supply a glut of discourses whose dangerousness need not be explained.

Besides the book's repetitiveness, a second small issue is that it's written too solidly in (and for) a specific historical moment. Most of its contemporary examples are drawn from the Donald Trump and MAGA (Make America Great Again) era, including socially chaotic phenomena like QAnon, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Covid-19 pandemic (the January 6 attack on the US Capitol gets passing mention, but is incorrectly dated to 2022 instead of 2021). These are, thematically, good examples. However, I worry that they "work" for today's audience because many of us

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remember them quite clearly, not because they are especially well-contextualized in the book. Danesi does an admirable job exploring some of the more esoteric details of specific dangerous discourses, like the QAnon conspiracy theory. But because he seems to assume that readers are familiar with the social and historical contexts in which such discourses circulated, his introductory descriptions can be quite thin. As a result, I suspect that were I to assign this book tomorrow to first-year undergraduates – who were alive when QAnon was ascendant but in elementary school – they would find themselves thoroughly perplexed. To be fair, Danesi is decidedly not alone in this style of presentation. But since semiotic analysis is an overly scrupulous game of small features, it's incumbent upon us as analysts to ensure that the features that matter most are as properly arranged in our analyses as can be, and I don't think Danesi always gets there.

A third issue is that Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are each devoted to a different type of dangerous discourse – denials, big lies, and false narratives, respectively – presented as more or less distinct types of discourse. But this is an illusion, since denials often involve lies, lies can be narratively structured, and so on. Why is Holocaust denialism not also a big lie? I get that dividing the general object of inquiry this way is a useful way to structure the book, and Danesi doesn't overstate differences or draw thick boundaries between types. But organizing the book like this risks misleading readers into seeing these discourses as real kinds, rather than as writerly heuristics.

There are other small issues like these, but I'll leave it there because the book's bigger issue, its fatal flaw, is more urgently existential. It has two aspects. First, *Semiotics with a Conscience* is not really a book about semiotics; second, it doesn't say much about the danger in dangerous discourses.

Perhaps that first claim is an overstatement, and I should rephrase. The book *concerns* semiotics. But it does not really show us how exactly to work with semiotics, nor does it offer an especially compelling model for why semiotic analysis is better-suited than other methods for understanding dangerous discourses. Danesi states in the preface that he's written the book for the general public and as such he shies away from overly technical exposition. This is commendable, and, overall, the prose is quite readable for an erudite public (or advanced undergraduate student). But if readers want to learn how to apply a technical semiotic analysis – even a rudimentary one – to, say, a piece of fake news they've encountered on social media, then there's very little here for them to absorb.

This isn't to say that there's nothing useful in this regard. The book contains insightful discussions of thinkers like Saussure, and especially Barthes (for some reason Peirce receives surprisingly low billing), along with many others. There are lots of cases and examples (both historical and contemporary) whose "dangerous" stakes Danesi communicates well. In Chapter 1 there is even a version of a usable analytical

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0018 | **punctum.gr**

framework presented. But here's where the big issue begins: that framework is not very good. It's overly simplistic and never applied in any rigorous or coherent way. It may not even be a framework at all. I'm only calling it a framework because there is a diagram – badly labeled and under-explained – that gives graphic form to a basic idea: we interpret discourses through codes, and codes are arranged as a network of nodes that are either rhetoric (including metaphors), symbols, images, or texts (especially narratives). Sometimes "code" is used neutrally, sometimes it's more like a "secret code," but otherwise this is as complex as it gets.

As a 'theoretical tool,' which is how the preface describes semiotics, this framework is lacking. Terms like image, symbol, text, and metaphor have technical (semiotic) senses, but they're also used colloquially. When the technical sense is not carefully explained (even if 'reaching a general public' is a good reason not to), then readers who are not otherwise initiated into semiotic thinking are likely to interpret them colloquially – which undermines the very purpose of the tool. The kinds of non-nuanced examples that Danesi relies on throughout the book contribute to this: an image is a thing like a photograph, a symbol is a thing like a swastika, a text is a thing like *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. That rhetoric can be textual and imagistic, that images can depict narratives, that symbols invoke metaphors – none of this really matters here. Instead, the main procedure is to present, say, a conspiracy theory, to label certain features as 'I-nodes' (images) and others as 'S-nodes' (symbols) and so on, and to describe the whole assemblage as a semiotic network, even though doing so adds nothing; it's all just an exercise in giving new names to familiar things.

This is all not very satisfying. If *Semiotics with a Conscience* is offering readers a theoretical tool, then those readers should finish the book with more than the ordinary interpretive instruments they started it with. (I'll note that Danesi does draw on the concept of *apophenia*, the tendency to find meaningful connections between unrelated things, though it's not a uniquely semiotic idea). However, because the approach promised in the book's title ultimately amounts to an intuitive truism – that dangerous discourses are built from metaphors, symbols, images, and texts – I don't think this tool can be properly described as semiotic, or maybe even as a tool at all.

Now for the second point. What makes the dangerous discourses identified in the subtitle *dangerous*? Or, really, what shifts a piece of discourse from a presumably neutral position to something that's more or less (for lack of a better term) *bad*? A reasonable presumption going into this book is that the badness (the "danger" in dangerous discourses) can be found in signs themselves, or at least very nearby. Yet the book's semiotic framework, such as it is, is agnostic as to its ethical valence (despite repeated entreaties to ethics). Readers who know nothing about semiotics might assume that everything Danesi describes is somehow uniquely applicable to *dangerous* discourses. Danesi never makes that claim, but he also doesn't adequately distinguish between

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generic semiotic analysis and a semiotic analysis applied to dangerous discourses. Maybe that's fine. Maybe the point is simply that semiotics can help us understand any kind of discourse, and dangerous discourses just happen to be the focus of this book. The question remains, though: *what makes a discourse dangerous*? It's never really answered. But there are clues.

At the end of the book (p. 151), Danesi declares that 'semiotics has obvious ethical implications, since it can expose the illegitimate use of signs in a concrete way.' The claim is notable in part because of its boldness, and in part because it raises a real question: what does 'the illegitimate use of signs' mean? Is this what makes a discourse dangerous, a use of signs that deviates from a 'legitimate use' into an 'illegitimate use'? And what about those of us who interpret the illegitimate use? Are we just semiotic dupes misrecognizing something bad as if it's legitimate? It's an odd framing, because however "legitimacy" is defined, it's usually thought of as culturally shaped, historically contingent, and unevenly distributed, always something applied to the things of the world by real social actors. Critically, it's not something that can necessarily be determined *within* a semiotic framework, and certainly not within the simplified version used in the book. If dangerous discourses are indeed about illegitimate sign-use, it seems like we'd need to look somewhere other than signs to understand them.

Danesi certainly understands this, which is perhaps why throughout the book he presents plenty of real social actors who put signs to "illegitimate" use. But those real social actors are disproportionately weighted toward world-historical bad guys like Hitler, Machiavelli, and Vladimir Putin, puppet-master types, 'master liars,' as Danesi describes them. Because there's not much said about the ordering of badness within a semiotic framework, this is where the *danger* question starts to feel tautological: dangerous discourses are dangerous because dangerous men promote them. It's almost as if the difficulty of answering a question like 'what makes a discourse dangerous *from a semiotic point of view*' has been bypassed, replaced by the repeated invocation of obvious bad actors responsible for their propagation. And on the interpretation side of things, it's similarly blunt. Why people 'fall for' these ruses can almost always be explained, according to Danesi, by neuroscience – that is, by a shared neural infrastructure that, through flukes of evolution, has left humans vulnerable to the hand of a manipulative malefactor.

Despite the book's pushing a semiotic network perspective, Danesi's core argument is essentially a *linear* one: individuals interpret dangerous discourses in certain ways because their brains are hardwired to do so, using the multiple resources that have been assembled for that purpose by some lone or institutional master liar. To understand how it all works, one must recognize that dangerous discourses have 'authors' on one end, and 'readers' on the other, with a 'text' that subsists between

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01:2026
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 110.18680/hss.2026.0018 | **punctum.gr**

them. Analysis requires describing some of the discourse's details; identifying and labeling within those descriptions any symbols as S-nodes, images as I-nodes, and metaphors as R-nodes; and then looking somewhere else to determine whether the whole assembly is dangerous or not.

This kind of approach is simply ill-suited to the semiotic reality of most contemporary dangerous discourses – even those with identifiable figureheads like Putin or Trump. It cannot tell us how dangerous discourses are collectively constructed (Bielo 2019), how they grow and spread in social space, how they thrive in particular political environments and fizzle out in others. Almost every contemporary example Danesi provides in the book doesn't really conform well to the linear model. Similar to memes (Wiggins 2019), these dangerous discourses are massively complex, emergent, medium-dependent (Gershon 2023), fueled by on-the-ground participation, enmeshed in many other 'non-dangerous' semiotic regimes (e.g., law, religion, science, nationalism), and so on. How and why any dangerous discourse is semiotically encoded (Murphy 2023), who benefits from doing so, how meaning-making processes have changed and adapted – none of this is given much attention, at least when it comes to recent examples (his discussion of the Dreyfus Affair is likely the closest we get in the book). To the degree that real social conditions matter to Danesi's approach, they don't count as a part of the machinery of dangerous discourses – only the chassis that contains them. Everything important is treated as part of a static code that can be easily decoded if one simply has the right tools to do it.

But Danesi himself doesn't always have those tools. Take, for example, his brief discussion of the "OK" hand gesture, which he describes like this (p. 46):

> Even a simple hand gesture can accrue coded meanings within the semiotic network that defines a group. For example, the 'OK' hand gesture, which appears innocent, is used by white supremacist groups as an iconic symbol, with the looped and extended fingers made to resemble the letters W and P, standing for "white power."

This is, at best, a significant misreading of the semiotics of the situation (not to mention its history). The "white power/OK" hand gesture was not a creation of any white power organization, nor was it ever used by avowed racists until long after its spread. The origins of the idea that the gesture is racist trace back to the mid-2010s. But the claim was supercharged by a post on the platform 4Chan in 2017. An anonymous user (all users on the platform are anonymous by design) posted the following, with the title "Introducing: Operation O-KKK:" [1]

[1] Archived here, visit at your own risk: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/114482325/

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> We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy. Make fake accounts with basic white girl names and type shit like: OMG that's so truuuuu
>
> Use as many emojis as you please. It would also be good for us to associate the OK sign being a symbol of white supremacy because Mel Gibson used it.
>
> Use the hashtag "#PowerHandPrivilege" in all of your tweets and whatnot related to this.
>
> Bonus points if your profile pic is something related to supporting feminism.
>
> Leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force to dig more, until the rest of society aint going anywhere near that shit

In other words, the whole thing began as an intentional trolling campaign to persuade ordinary people like Danesi to believe that the OK gesture is racist. Expanding on the original poster's call to action, users began digging up old photos of rightwing politicians and celebrities performing the gesture, which they'd re-circulate on social media along with the claim that their subjects were secretly signaling white power allegiance. Soon enough, rightwing groups like the Proud Boys and even young staffers in Trump's White House were photographed using the OK gesture (though technically, linking OK to Trump had started a few years before). This helped flood social media with both the gesture and the claim, while also allowing new participants to acknowledge winkingly that they, too, were playing the trolling game. Traditional media outlets began reporting on accusations that White House interns were using racist gestures, which rapidly propelled an obscure internet "joke" into mainstream awareness. As liberals and Democrats began repeating the claim that the gesture is racist, Trump supporters would prominently display it at Trump rallies. Eventually, several political watchdog groups labeled the gesture a hate symbol. Only then did members of actual racist organizations start using it – not because the fingers look like a (partially upside-down!) abbreviation for white power (note that this makes little sense), but because a small group of internet trolls engaged in coordinated semiotic warfare trying to change a common hand gesture's meaning. And, in large part, it worked.

This isn't really the space for detailing a more technical analysis of this example, but I think it's clear that Danesi's reading of the racist OK gesture is far less complex and far less interesting – and ultimately wrong in its upshot – than what actually happened in the real world. It's not a story of "codes" and "images" and the

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **12:**01**:**2026
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passive accrual of meaning within a single social group. It's a story of real humans actively operationalizing a folk theory of semiotics and taking advantage of the affordances of social media to forcibly re-engineer how a very normal and innocuous sign is interpreted (cf. Wąsik 2025). Not all dangerous discourses follow this pattern, of course, and my point is not to assume that they do. But I do think this example illustrates how examining dangerous discourses primarily as *social projects* rather than simply as multimodal texts can provide a much richer and more explanatory semiotic analysis.

To be clear, every major contemporary example of a dangerous discourse used in *Semiotics with a Conscience* (not just the OK gesture) can be looked at in this way, by starting not with the dangerous discourse itself, but with a question: *why does this particular discourse exist right now and in this form*? All these examples involve some kind of intentional manipulation, distortion, or obfuscation. All of them center on a disruption of existing or alternative significations between signs, referents, and the world for some sort of malign purposes. How that manipulation practically unfolds, who goes about doing it, who is it aimed at, what counts as "malign" in a given situation – answers to these and many other questions could push a 'semiotics with a conscience' much further and produce far more consequential results than the simplistic 'decoding' approach advanced by Danesi.

In the end, while I think *Semiotics with a Conscience* would have been a more successful book had it taken the kind of dynamic approach I've noted here, that's ultimately just a difference of scholarly opinion. The bigger problem, as I see it, is that I'm not even sure the book succeeds on its own terms. Had there been fewer examples but with better context and more careful, even didactic analysis for each of them, then maybe it would feel more usable, more indispensable. As it stands, however, the combination of several small issues haunting the text throughout and a couple more substantial issues sitting at its base makes recommending this book very difficult.

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