



The Semiotics of Dancing

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Dance, as an organized form of movement within a given practice, has been a vital part of societies and cultures since the beginning of time. This seemingly simple definition raises many questions about the perspectives and fields through which dance, or rather, dances can be understood. Indeed, seeking universal “grammars” of dance appears pointless, even if it is viewed as a *body technique* (Mauss 1934). Is dance an art form, or does it aim to produce meaning in practices such as – to name just a few – rituals, activism, and therapy? And even if we focus on the artistic, religious, anthropological, and sociocultural areas, how can we overlook the differences between a hip-hop jam, a dervish dance, a *Bharata Natyam* performance, a contemporary dance show, a *milonga*, etc.? Do these differences represent different autonomous semiosis, or should they be understood only in terms of the semiospheres or forms of life where they occur? Also, are there general – though not universal – features of semiosis that dance demonstrates, as René Thom (1991) once suggested?

Despite a long tradition in philosophy (Valéry 1921, Boissière and Kintzler 2006, Bresnahan 2019) and anthropology (Shawn 1940, Royce 1977, Grau and Wierre-Gore 2005), dance still challenges semiotics today. Greimas took initial steps toward a semiotic study of dance in the notable 1968 issue of *Langages*, focusing on gestuality. The structural hypothesis was applied to the analysis of certain folk and traditional dances (Proca-Ciortea and Giurchescu 1968), and the development of kinetics and proxemics allowed them to be connected to broader cultural projects (Birdwhistell 1968).

However, since then, the semiotic interest in dance has gradually waned, and the structural perspective has only been pursued within the field of ethnochoreology. Only a few continued to examine dance movements, either by focusing on the work of dancer and choreographer Rudolf Laban (Maletic 1987) or by examining the “geometry” of the human body in relation to attempts to notate movement (Bouissac 1973). It was not until the turn of the 21st century that the semiotic study of dance reemerged. Jacques Fontanille’s semiotics of the body, combined with his work on practices (Fontanille 2004, 2008, 2011), made it possible to link the way in which the body constitutes itself as an actant to the elements that are transferred to a predicative stage (practices). From an enactive perspective, cognitive semiotics has clarified the relationship between movement affordances and interaction (Kimmel 2012, 2016) and between improvisation and joint action (Kirsh 2011).

Other research approaches problematize dance in relation to its modes of signification based on questions about its representational, iconic, and/or diagrammatic nature (Sonesson 2009, Maiorani 2020), through the prism of the interaction effects it generates (Landowski 2004, 2005), in its capacity to engage in processes of intermodal and intersemiotic translation (Righi and Dusi eds. 2010), or, lastly, its role as a cultural foundation shaping the boundaries and identity of social groups (Sedda 2003). Recent studies on Argentine tango (De Luca 2017a, 2017b, 2021a, 2021b), the relationship between dance and expressiveness (De Luca 2024), the deictic function of dance movements (De Luca 2021c), and performance (De Luca ed. 2020) have shed light on the connection between the embodiment of a body technique, the development of gestural forms and figures in dance interaction, and the practical and imaginary sedimentation of values that can be transposed to other expressive regimes (textualizations, diagrammatizations, institutionalization, etc.).

Still, many questions remain. For example, in the case of various socio-political protests, what role does the “borrowing” of a particular dance from another cultural space play (remember the tango danced during the 2013 protests in Istanbul’s Taksim Square)? Or conversely, how do forms of dance emerge during mass movements, whether political or recreational – such as during concerts, collective “trance” phenomena, etc.? From the perspective of cultural semiotics, what value do the forms and processes of



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institutionalization – if not heritage preservation – of social, popular (De Luca 2020), traditional, or folk dances have in a global context marked by both the circulation and immediate remediation of signs and related practices, and by nationalism of all stripes?

On the other hand, turning to the semiotics of art and the performing arts, how can we investigate the relationship between what can be described as an *aesthetic dispositif* and the resulting *performative situation* (De Luca 2025)? In other words, how are their grammars reconfigured as contemporary dance forms increasingly move off stage to occupy other spaces – such as the street, museums, commercial venues, and others? How are choreographic movements transmitted without fixed “blocks” of movement? How are actorial roles redistributed in anonymous, collective dances? By what means do dance movements become visible? How do they articulate with and within different spaces?

Contributions may focus on general aspects of dance or corpus analyses from various perspectives – Greimasian, post-Greimasian, Peircean, cultural, artistic, or media-related – and address (non-exhaustive list):

- The relationship between body techniques and choreographic “signs”
- Improvisation
- The multimodal and/or intersemiotic relationship between dance and other semiotic systems (music, writing, digital media)
- Dance spaces, both physical and fictional
- Social and cultural imaginaries embodied by dances (popular, leisure, traditional, etc.)
- Forms of socio-political engagement in dance and/or forms of cultural appropriation
- The relationship between the moving nature of dance and forms of institutionalization or normativization
- Dance in the age of AI
- Metaphors of dance or dance as an emblem
- The relationship between dance and cognition

Prospective authors are invited to submit an abstract of 250-300 words (not counting the references) by email to the guest editor Valeria De Luca (valeria.de-luca@unilim.fr), including their institutional affiliation and contact information. Acceptance of the abstract does not guarantee publication, given that all research articles will undergo peer review. After the approval of the abstract, the papers for submission should be 6,000-8,000 words.