

Why Music and Dance Need Semiotics

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Introduction

This work aims at presenting semiotics in a manner that appeals to performers and researchers in dance and music. It emphasizes on its capacity to approach affects, signification and interaction in addition to symbolic relationships. The argument is developed in dialogical form between Danna the dance researcher and Selma the semiotician. A number of references are included to allow the reader to inquire further into specific topics of interest.

Development

DANNA: You are so insistent. It is not that I don't know what semiotics is, or how dance anthropology and anthropology in general have benefited from it. Do you think I have not read the works of Geertz and Turner? [1-2] The notion of *symbolic meanings* permeated anthropology before post-structuralism, but that is precisely my point: semiotics reached its expiry date, and with good reason [3]. This notion of "signs" as something standing for something else can only take us so far [4]. It can be useful in rituals when the actions carried out have a direct correspondence with symbolic meanings. For example, I can imagine a rain dance, where we stomp our feet dancing and chanting, hoping to make it rain. This is at once performative (we want there to be rain while before there was none) and symbolic (stomping corresponds to making rain). The correspondence is evident from the basic textbooks in semiotics: signifier–signified, stomping–making rain...it is helpful, but it is static. How could semiotics address the experience of dancing the rain dance, the very interaction between the dancers as they perform, equipped only with the simple signifier–signified dichotomy? And

if you reply that Peirce's definition of sign would do better because it adds the *interpretant* to the dichotomy [5-6], I will simply tell you that I doubt it. Postulating an entity that stands for something else will always relegate experience. You wanted to know why I don't believe in semiotics to study dance or music? Well, there it is.

SELMA: Danna, I actually subscribe most of what you said. If we think of semiotics as "the discipline that studies signs", and of a sign as something that stands for something else, it is impossible to come close to experience, for it will always be hiding behind a signifier.

DANNA: I am glad I finally put some sense into you.

SELMA: Let us not be too hasty. Semiotics is beautiful! it is not merely concerned with these abstract entities we call signs. It is the discipline devoted to study meaning, sense, or more technically, the combination of the two: *signification* [7-8]. How do you distinguish the tall trees of this park from the gray sidewalk appearing beside you? When you read any text whatsoever, how do you manage to make sense of it? When you dance in one of our salsa evenings, how does it feel to interact with your partner, how do you know what moves to make and when? All of this has to do with how we produce signification [8-9]. You see how fascinating it is?

DANNA: Your account is touching indeed, and I admit I had not construed semiotics in that way. Yet, I think you are trying to trick me. Since I said that semiotics will never be able to address experience because it relies on signs, now you change its definition radically. But I will challenge your idea that semiotics can deal with experience. You cannot deny that many approach semiotics through signs, and it seems to me that in this signifier–signified business there is no room for a fundamental component for every performer: *affect*.

SELMA: To make room for affect, instead of thinking signifier–signified, we should think of signification as the intersection between the sensible and subjective worlds, between expression and content [10]. Moreover, to contest your challenge I turn to Peirce's understanding of signs [11]. According to Peirce, a sign is anything which is "*determined* by something else", namely its object, and thus "*determines an effect* upon a person" or agent [12]. It is true that in *icon* signs, the sign is representing or resembling something else. But *index* signs are different: if you see someone handsome smiling at you and you blush, you are not responding "cognitively", as if you were searching for a meaning to associate with the smile. You responded *affectively*. The very sign you perceived acted on you, and here you have a won-

derful link between semiotics and affect theory, which some anthropologists have themselves acknowledged [13-14].

DANNA: You have not lost your gift for persuasion, Selma. What you say makes sense: how we are affected by our interactions with the world is an integral part of how we make sense of it.

SELMA: Precisely!

DANNA: Nevertheless, if experience and our interaction with the world are such an important aspect of semiotics, how is it different from phenomenology, or cognitive science?

SELMA: This is an important and complex question. First we must remember that semiotics is diverse: you have Lotman's semiotics of culture [15-16], Peirce's semiotics as pragmatist philosophy [17-18], Saussure's semiology departing from linguistics [19], Greimas's semiotics addressing narrativity and action processes [20-21]...I could go on. Nevertheless, I would say that semiotics can be distinguished from other disciplines considering first its point of departure. Not all, but much of the work done in semiotics started from studying narrativity, textual interpretation or discourse analysis of written text. This has played an important role on how the discipline developed, but in the last 50 years (i.e., after structuralism) semiotics has expanded its scope and methods considerably. Something I consider particularly attractive about semiotics is its commitment to providing *models*. This is important for researchers in music, dance, and the social sciences because it is very easy to get lost in language. Semiotics will help you with *thinking tools*, that is, with methods to represent and conceptualize your research. On the other hand, if you contrast semiotics with phenomenology, you have that semiotics is concerned with *signification*, that is, with the relation between our sensible and our subjective experiences. Phenomenology, in contrast, is chiefly concerned with our experience of things, relying on the principle that consciousness is always directed towards something [22-23]. In the case of cognitive science, cognition and signification are studied searching for causal explanations, for example measuring brain and bodily signals and modeling neural behavior. Fortunately today these different disciplines are converging and interacting ever more; this has motivated the notion of a *cognitive semiotics* [24-26].

DANNA: But given its roots in the study of texts and narratives, how could semiotics possibly deal with interaction, one of the most important aspects to musicking and dancing?

SELMA: Today, action is a fundamental concern for much of semiotics, and the body is granted a central role in the production of signification [27-30]. Greimas, for example, one of the most influential semioticians, was very concerned with action, and even if he departed from studying texts and fairy tales, he developed the *canonical narrative schema*, a model to understand action processes in narratives, theater plays, or any object we might regard as semiotic [20, 31]. Greimas thought that under all narratives there are relationships between something that behaves like a subject that desires an object, and that narratives are structured by how the subject is first *manipulated* to pursue a quest, then receives help, faces obstacles, and finally performs to fulfill his quest for their object of desire. The next step was to consider passions such as jealousy or envy, where two or more subjects *interact* by relating to a common object of desire [32].

DANNA: But music and dance are about having a partner, not an object to play and dance with you!

SELMA: I agree, but a subject desiring an object is the same as a subject with an intention to act. In his semiotics of interaction [7, 33-34], Landowski advances the concept of *adjustment* to complement Greimas's *manipulation*: when we play music we don't always want to impose our intention on others, we rather form intentions of action together relying on sensing, feeling and adjusting to each other and to our environment. On a similar line, a friend of mine studied how step dancers in Peru challenge each other in "battles" or *contrapuntos* using Greimas's semiotics [35-36]. He observed that different patterns of interaction emerge depending on the levels of competence of the competitors, and on their willingness to share the object of desire, that is, the public's attention and praise. Interaction can, for example, take the form of *dominant-dominated*, of *rivalry* if the two dancers have similar skills and both want to win, or of *collaboration*, when the two behave friendly towards the other and share the public's applause. He claims this applies to other practices such as battle rap and Capoeira.

Conclusion

Semiotics is a field in expansion with the challenge of engaging in closer interplay with other disciplines. The exchange between music, dance and semiotics, I believe, is both mutually beneficial and necessary: it will allow us to gain greater insight into affect, interaction and signification in relation to these practices, and on the other hand, the critical application of semiotical methods will lead semiotics to rethink itself to respond to specific demands in

contemporary research.

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