Dancing all the Way to the Stage by Way of the Stadium

On the Iconicity and Plasticity of Actions

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Abstract: In the sense of phenomenology, actions are special cases of acts of consciousness. Within semiotics, first Jan Mukařovský and then A.J. Greimas, have established, in different terms, a distinction between instrumental actions and actions which carry their meaning in themselves. But this is insufficient to account for the variety of actions which comprises everything from the creation of artefacts, dance, sporting events, theatre, rituals, and much else. Already those actions mentioned relate in different ways to instrumentality and intrinsic meaning, as well as to (depictive) iconicity and plasticity. In this paper, I will be particularly concerned with dancing, especially classical ballet, trying to delimit it from sporting events and theatre. Apart from the sign function and the spectacular function, I will notably have recourse to what I have elsewhere term secondary (depictive) iconicity as well as to plasticity. In the process, I hope to be able to throw some light also on the nature of sport, by comparing and contrasting it to dance, as well as to the theatre as well as, more incidentally, to some other types of action. In a wider perspective, my ambition is to contribute to a general inquiry into the semiosis of actions.

Keywords: plasticity, iconicity, depiction, intentionality, basic action, theatre, dance, sport, frames.

1. Exordium

The meaning of action is a domain of scrutiny which has hardly been touched within semiotics proper. During the acme of French structuralism, the meanings of actions were certainly addressed, but since the fundamental distinction between meanings directly afforded to perception, and meanings conveyed by means of signs, was not observed, not much can be concluded from these analyses. The same is true, mutatis mutandis, about Peircean semiotics, since Peirce’s notion of sign is so broad as not to be able to account for the differences between
the ways in which meanings are conveyed, except, of course, to the extent that they involve the different trichotomies, which are of scant help in the present business. Nevertheless, it bears mentioning that, within the semiotic tradition, a distinction was made twice, and as it seems independently, by Jan Mukařovský (1974, 1978) and A.J. Greimas (1970), between acts which have an instrumental function, and thus gain their meaning from something outside the act itself, and acts which as such instantiate meaning, that is, in the ideal case, constitute signs. Although neither Mukařovský nor Greimas refers to the old Marxian tenet, it could be said that what both of them contrasted were acts that aim to change the world, and acts that aspire to interpret it. But this does not get us very far in the semiotics of actions.

In the following, I will suggest that phenomenology offers the best method for approaching the nature of human action, as well as of its different kinds, but it cannot be said that exponents of phenomenology have been much concerned with these issues so far. The only phenomenologist who has written about action, or more in particular about dance, would seem to be Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999, 2015). Unfortunately, I have not found her analysis very useful at the level of exploration on I will stay in this paper. On the other hand, from its early beginnings in the work of, notably, Arthur Danto (1973), the philosophy of action, as understood in Anglo-American philosophy, has flourished, but it seems to have focused on different levels of interpretation of actions, rather than differentiating their kind. Linguists have written a lot, also recently, about the way actions are conveyed in different languages (See Foolen et al. 2012). Although different languages focus on different properties, they can only attend to features which are potentially afforded by real-world actions, while making a different selection out of what is offered to experience. Then there is, of course, what sociologists and anthropologists have written about action, from Max Weber to Norbert Elias and further to Bruno Latour. There is the historical survey of Johan Huizinga (1955) and the philosophical reflections of Roger Caillois (1958). I have myself written a few papers, in which I have tried to differentiate actions understood as tool use, dance, sport, theatre, and what is understood within visual art as performance (See Sonesson 2000, 2009a). As for the impressive contribution to the analysis of sports and games authored by Pierre Parlebas (1999, 2003, 2020), it has left fewer traces in this paper than it merits, simply because it was only the invitation to contribute to this thematic issue that made me discover it.

Although we will attend to all these traditions of thought in the following, we will conclude that the basic task is still to be done. Therefore, we need to start by characterizing cognitive semiotics.
2. Cognitive Semiotics

As I have explained elsewhere, Cognitive Semiotics is a research tradition starting out from the convergence and further amalgamation of two earlier research traditions, Semiotics and Cognitive Science (See Sonesson 2009b, 2009c, 2016, 2019a, 2021). Going beyond any simple genealogy tracing the steps forward from Peirce and Saussure, semiotics must be considered a distinct research tradition, which forms an extended temporal sequence made up of problems formulated from a particular perspective, solutions proposed to these problems, as well as new issues resulting from these solutions, and so on indeterminately. In this view, a research tradition can sometimes, at some places, be consolidated into a discipline, but before that, and after that, and at other places, it continues to exist as a network of (generations of) scholars, who are connected because of sustaining these issues and implementing some of these solutions. The perspective defining semiotics is the nature of meaning, broadly conceived, which may involve how meaning is produced and conserved by means of different vehicles, and how it develops in children, and in the evolution of human beings and other animals.

In the case of Cognitive Science, the viewpoint could best be characterized as “consciousness” or “mind”, although, at the beginning, many exponents of this research tradition wanted to do away with the latter notions, and some of them still hold on to this position. Nevertheless, the first “popular” presentation of the tradition bore the title “The mind’s new science” (See Gardner 1985), and in recent decades, one important strand within cognitive science has been “the science of consciousness”, which comprehends, notably, novel approaches to Husserlean phenomenology, but also contributions from the Anglo-American philosophy of mind, leading to what is fundamentally the first encounter of these two traditions of research. In any case, the tradition characterized by the perspective of cognitive science is certainly much more recent than that of semiotics, but it takes on the heritage of many older research traditions, some of which, such as philosophy and linguistics, it shares with semiotics, but several others which are new to the amalgamation, such as psychology, neurology, and computer science.

This poses the question what the advantage can be of marrying semiotics and cognitive science. For one, it allows us to bring the findings of the two traditions together, and, perhaps more, importantly the methods used, and the issues of contention with their different solutions giving rise to new problems, and so on. In other papers, I have emphasized the importance of bringing experimental methods into the panoply of semiotics, since they have rarely been used until recently (See Sonesson 2019c). However, I have always insisted that experimental design cannot have any sense if it has not been prepared beforehand by a phenomenological analysis.
of the features varied in the experimental situations, and that the results of experiments can only acquire any meaning once they are related to the Lifeworld, that is, the common-sense world in which we all stake out our life. Within the framework of cognitive semiotics, I have myself participated in many experimental studies focusing on other domains of semiosis. As far as I know, however, there are no experimental studies (with one exception to which I will turn below: Khatia Chikhladze 2021) which bears of the issues we will have to discuss in this paper, which is why, in the following, I will proceed along the lines of a phenomenological study, including, of course, the hermeneutics constituted by taking account of earlier texts based on (mostly undeclared) phenomenological studies. It is to be hoped that this approach can be complemented in the future by experimental studies.

Table 1. The distinction of subjectivity, bi-subjectivity and objectivity in the phenomena accessed and the modes of access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of access</th>
<th>Phenomena accessed</th>
<th>Subjectivity (First person)</th>
<th>Bi-subjectivity (Second person)</th>
<th>Intersubjectivity/Objectivity (Third person)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity  (First person)</td>
<td>Introspection</td>
<td>Empathy (subjective focus)</td>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-subjectivity (Second person)</td>
<td>Empathy (bi-subjective focus)</td>
<td>Dialogue, Interview</td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersubjectivity/Objectivity (Third person)</td>
<td>Behaviouristic description (“hetero-phenomenology”)</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Experimentation Detached observation Brain imagining Computational modelling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before we continue, it will be necessary to characterize, very briefly, the phenomenological method. Armed with the slogan “to the things themselves”, Edmund Husserl aimed to describe the content of consciousness as it was experienced, without worrying about whether this content had any basis in fact or not, and then applying to this content the method of variation in the imagination, in order to determine which properties were essential, and which were not, to the characterization of the meaning-type of which the content was an instantiation. In order to go beyond the immediate experience in the Lifeworld, Husserl tells us we first have to make the *epoché*, by means of which we put brackets around our immediate experience, not to doubt it, but to suspend judgment about its relation to reality, whether it is in the mode of perception, imagination, memory, anticipation, and so on. There follows the *phenomenological reduction*, by means of which we turn away from the content or object of
our experience, which is what counts in ordinary life, instead being directed to the act in which the experience is given. Then there is the *eidetic reduction*, which permits us to go from the singular experience to general facts, or, in Husserl’s terms, essences, as a result of ideation, the free variation of features in the imagination. Peirce also characterized what he originally called phenomenology, but later rebaptized phaneroscopy, in very similar terms (See Sonesson 2017). In both cases, it should be clear that the object is not to describe any features of individual consciousness, as in introspection, but to find the invariant structures of consciousness (See Table 1). Actions, and its kinds, can be seen as such invariants. Nevertheless, since, in this case, the access to both subjectivity and objectivity follows the route of subjectivity, there is always a risk of phenomenology being contaminated by introspection. Apart from the different operations mentioned above, Husserl assurance against such a jeopardy is the continuous repetition over time of the same inquiry. In this sense, phenomenological analysis is never finally consummated.

3. Approaches to the Semiotics of Action

Edmund Husserl (1968a, 1968b, 1968c) early on uses the term “act” to describe any episode of consciousness. As he first described them, such acts have different “qualities”, that is, they are perceptions, rememberings, imaginings, etc. and different “matters”, they are about different phenomena. If we think of such acts as verbally embodied, we arrive at what more later scholars have termed speech acts. Most of the acts entertained by human beings distinguished by Husserl and his fellow phenomenologists are not actions in the colloquial sense. Even though they tend to go beyond consciousness in the sense of being directed to things in the common-sense world, the Lifeworld, they do not need to be manifested in this world in the form of bodily movements. In phenomenological terms, they are *intentional*: they are directed to something experienced a being beyond consciousness. This is a sense of intentionality, of which purpose is a very special variant.

3.1 From Acts to Actions

Still, movements of the human body, whether they are intentional (in the wide or the narrow sense) or not, have a very important part to play in human experience. A case epitomized by Husserl, and often quoted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is when one hand seizes the other, allowing us to experience our body at the same time as subject and object of the action, in Husserl’s terms as both *Leib* and *Körper*: as active from the “inside”, and passively as an outer surface. But movements play an even more important part in human experience. Our perception of things as things, and not just as sense data, and of the world as contained in infinite horizons,
depends on our ability to move within this world of our experience, on our potentiality for going around an object, or turning it over in our hand, to get to know it better. In fact, there is a sense in which “act qualities” like perceiving is an action: our experience of any object as an object, and not just the specific adumbration, which is optically offered to us, depends on the notion “I can always go further” (“I kann immer weiter”), which accompanies each act.

And yet there is a wide domain of human actions, both those that produce meaning, and those which appear to us as already endowed with meaning, which has received scant attention in phenomenology. In the example favoured by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the arm which reaches out to palp the other arm would seem to constitute more of an action than the latter. Of course, in terms frequently used in Husserl’ posthumous works, kinestheses are equally produced in both arms, and these are certainly acts, in the sense of experiences, but hardly actions. The arm which moves in order to accomplish this encounter, however, must be considered a kind of action. It is not, however, an action which produces any result separate from its very occurrence. It does not give rise to any enduring artefact. Moreover, unlike gestures, in the ordinary sense, it does not produce any sign intended to convey meaning to other subjects.

As mentioned above, both Greimas (1970) and Mukařovský (1978) have suggested a primary distinction of movements originating in the human body which convey meanings and those which aim to change the world in one way or another or to reorganize reality in such a way that the reorganization can be used to the advantage of the subject-operator. Using the terms in what seems a very broad sense, Greimas calls the first kind gestures, and the second one practices. But, clearly, the same or similar movements of the body can be either gestures or practices, or, in other words, meaningful actions or instrumental actions. In the article in which he distinguishes between gestures and practices, Greimas speaks of dance as a kind of "playful gesture". It's hard to know what sort of dance Greimas is thinking of here – to begin with, whether he refers to ballroom dancing or dance performance. In any case, the distinction between gestures and practices is to some extent misleading: dance is also a kind of practice – and this, in two ways: it represents practices as well as gestures – and it comports its own practice. Even in classical ballet, such as "Giselle", dancers may pull real knives (or which seem to be such), knock on doors, and so on. However, there are also instrumental actions specific to dance: when the dancer lifts the prima ballerina, it is not first and foremost a dance action that he performs for its own sake, but an instrumental action aimed at lifting her into a higher sphere, physically and ideally. In some ways, his action is comparable to the activities of the stage workers in ordinary theatre. As for traditional ballroom dancing, the movements of the male
dancer may be considered at least half instrumental in moving the female dancer around – at least according to the norm, even if in reality the opposite may often be the case. Even so, this once again blurs the distinction between Greimasean gesture and practice.

Neither Mukařovský nor Greimas tells us where to place actions forming part of some kind of sport, let alone gymnastics or exercise. Should we extend Greimas’ term of “playful gesture” to these cases? Even if it doesn’t change the world as concretely as the action of digging a hole in the ground, sport, to the extent that it is part and parcel of some kind of competition, certainly is directed at a goal beyond the action as such, that is, its aim is winning the contest. Gymnastics, if it is not at the Olympic level, and more certainly exercise, may appear be more self-contained, but it cannot be said that every minute details of the action as such counts, as it would in classical ballet and modern dance. The varieties of action certainly seem to go well beyond a simple dichotomy between gesture and practice.

3.2 Between Basic Actions and Gestalten

In a sense, all different kinds of action may be brought about by means of the same bodily movement. In the so-called analytic philosophy of action, basic actions are distinguished from all other actions, as actions which are not performed by performing any other actions. In Arthur Danto’s work (1973: 28), basic actions are actually negatively defined, by being contrasted with mediated actions: “It is the mark of a mediated action mDa that there be an event b, distinct from a; that b itself be done by m; that a happen because b happens; and that that doing of b by m be a component of mDa.” Thus, to pick an example, if you raise your arms above your head, you may do so to carry out the action of unscrewing a lamp which doesn’t work anymore, as part of an exercise, to initiate a summersault, to pray to your god, to represent the movement of some personage you are incarnating on the theatre, or as a dance movement.

The obvious objection at this point, informed by Gestaltpsychology, as well as by phenomenologists inspired by the former tradition, such as Aron Gurwitsch (1964) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), is that we never perceive basic actions as such, but only as they are enmeshed in the totality given to perception. More specifically, several queries can be voiced at this point. First, even if the actions are physically indistinguishable, given the context, they will not be experienced as such; second, these actions are only identical at some specific level of description, which can always be made “thicker”, as the anthropologists say (See Geertz 1973), or, alternatively, the description can be rephrased at another “intensional depth” (See Næss 1953). Nevertheless, this is a possible level of description: after all, notations developed for describing dance, such as Labanotation and the Eshkol-Wachman system lend themselves to the coding of everyday gesture (of which I have personal experience in the latter case: see
Sonesson 1981). That this is at all possible is a token of the power of phenomenological analysis.

It must be admitted, nevertheless, that many of the examples I have given above of the possible interpretations of the same basic action would not be considered “mediated actions” (but still not basic) by Danto:

A man blesses someone by raising his arm. The blessing is something he does through raising his arm, and so seems non-basic, but clearly there is no event distinct from the raising of the arm in which the blessing consists, e.g. the blessing is not caused by the rising of the arm. What we have is a basic action performed in conformity with a rule which licenses a redescriptions of it as a blessing, providing the agent is in a position to play the role of blesser. Let us call such actions gestures (Danto 1973: 29).

The problem here is not so much that Danto proposes another idiosyncratic definition of gesture, but that, if such cases are excluded, the distinction seems less interesting, and/or that there doesn’t seem to be any obvious way of distinguishing this example of non-basic actions from what he has termed mediated actions.

Some examples, and distinctions made on this basis, by Robert Wilson (2004: 77ff, 107ff) may be of some help here. For our purpose, we need to go beyond the onto-epistemological premises of Wilson’s work, which are founded on a dichotomy between mental content and the “real world”. What is interesting to us is his recognition that there is often (indeed, I would guess, always) a difference between the object to which a particular experience (description, label, etc.) applies, and the wider factors which must be taken into account for this object to be experienced (described, labelled, etc.) in this way.

Wilson (2004: 112 ff., 116f.) observes that, apart from “entity-bound realizations”, which are defined by properties entirely internal to their being (supposing these to exist), there are a lot of “wide realizations”, in the case of which the “noncore part is not located entirely within” the individual, and also “radically wide realizations” in which the “core part is not located entirely within /…/ the individual who has” the property in question. An example of a wide realization would be the property of being a predator, which is something which can only be understood in relation to a certain ecological niche, and also in relation to certain other animal species. This is basically the same example, seen from the other end of the relation, given by John Deely (2001) of an ens rationis, the notion of being prey, which can only be defined in relation to a specific predator. Other examples cited by Deely seem to be of the same general kind, such as “in-group”, which can only be understood in relation to the group outside, “safe area”, which is safe only in relation to that which is not safe (but if we take into account what the safety is safety from, we may very well end up in Wilson’s next category). Basically, then,
I think we can conclude that there are cases, in which, not only the (verbal) label, but also the experience, is about a particular object, but the meaning of the label and, more basically, the experience, needs to take into account features of the context which are not specifically referred to by the label, nor being focused on the object of which it is an experience (See Figure 1).

![Figure 1. A tentative illustration of what may be meant by Wilson’s “wide realizations”, separating the connections of “reference” of the experience and those contributing to the meaning of the reference.](image)

An example of a radically wide realization could be the act of signing a check, in which case the part accomplished by the individual, that is, the movement of the hand which produces a scribble, is a very small part of all the institutions and conventions necessary for securing the identity of the act (See Figure 2). A somewhat more up to date example of the same procedure might be to introduce your card into the payment device at the pay desk, and then entering your code. Money, conceived by John Searle (1996) to be a kind of “institutional fact”, seems to be a relatively simple case of Wilson’s category, to the extent that signing a check (which is a procedure which in many parts of the world is no longer performed, or only rarely so) is basically creating money out of thin air, which only works if the air is thick enough to contain a full bank account, a bank which has not gone bankrupt, and so on. We could no doubt extend this to the writing of a book, which, apart from writing materials, requires a lot of institutions, at present, but also already in the Medieval and Mesoamerican worlds of book writing. In any case, Danto’s example of a blessing is clearly of this kind.

Rather than there being two kinds of *ens rationis* or mind-dependent beings, namely “wide realizations” and “radically wide realizations”, there may really be a continuous scale between the one and the other. The examples given by Deely, Searle, and Wilson show that these kinds of relations are very common: in fact, we will be hard pressed to find examples of phenomena which are not at least to some extent “wide” or “mind-independent”. Indeed, one may wonder if there really is anything that can be described as “entity-bound realizations”. In
any case, a distinction suggested by Husserl, and current in phenomenology, is useful here: when we focus on some object of experience, we may either choose to go further to explore its inner horizons, or its outer horizons. In the first case, we delve deeper into the minute properties of the object which was our primary focus; in the second case, we extend our focus to include the environment of the primary object. If we apply this perspective to the conception of consciousness suggested by Husserl, and explicated by Aron Gurwitsch, in terms of theme, thematic field, and margin, this means that, on one hand, the meaning of the theme can be influenced by the thematic field, as well as by also by the margin, but also, that it can be determined by the potentially of changing the focus onto singular properties of the object forming the primary focus.

![Figure 2](image-url)

Figure 2. A tentative illustration of what may be meant by Wilson’s “radically wide realizations”.

According to Aron Gurwitsch (1964, 1985) human consciousness is made up of a theme which is the centre of attention, a thematic field around it consisting of items which are connected to the present theme by means of intrinsic links permitting it to be transformed into a theme in its own right, as well as other items present “at the margin” at the same time, without having any other than temporal relations to the theme and its field. More specifically, as Gurwitsch (1985) has observed, three sets of data are always concomitant with any particular mental act, that is, part of the margin: a certain segment of the stream of consciousness, a portion of one’s own body, and a certain sector of the perceptual environment. They are all given in open horizons, although those of the body are obviously more limited in scope, at least pertaining to the outer horizon. Indeed, the outer horizon of the body rapidly becomes part of the perceptual environment, which is what accounts for the embeddedness. Something which may have to be added to this analysis, nevertheless, is that the meaning of the theme itself depends on the scope of consciousness, which is taken into account, potentially corresponding
to sediments of earlier experiences, and/or protensions of possible future experiences, even if not actively addressed, which is certainly true of the thematic field, and perhaps also of the margin.

Figure 3. The thematic field, as conceived by Gurwitsch

This is clearly the direction in which we have to search for the differences between gesture, tool use, design, spectacle, dance, sport, and the like.

4. Goal-directed Actions, Signs, and Spectacles

In attempt to pursue the rather divergent structuralist traditions of the Prague and the Copenhagen Schools, Olle Hildebrand (1976) proposed a distinction between sport, ritual and theatre by means of a cross-classification employing the dichotomies “stage versus audience” and “expression versus content”, where sport realizes the first dichotomy, ritual the second and theatre both. The first opposition is derived from Mukařovský, and the second from Saussure and, more specifically, Hjelmslev. Put in terms more congenial to the Prague school approach, we have to do with the referential and spectacular functions, respectively (Table 2). But, clearly, Hildebrand is confusing sport with the sport event: the former is defined by the goal of winning the competition, and the latter, in addition, requires this feat to be accomplished in presence of an audience (even one having only online access, as happened recently at the Japan Olympics).

There is a further problem pertaining to the spectacular function: it clearly can be realized without there being any formal distinction between stage and audience – most obviously so, of course, if the subject of action is also the one experiencing the spectacle, as in the case of what Parlebas (1999) calls “semiotricity”. But, as we will see, from the Decembrists to the Situationists, and beyond, there are ways of establishing the spectacular function, without any
formal delimitation between stage and audience, just as there are ways, at least in the world of art, of presenting actions on a scene, from Happenings to Performance, which do not have any specific content, and which are still something different from sport events. A more general problem with this comparison is that the selection of phenomena to compare is arbitrary. Where does dance fit into the model? What should we do with acrobatics, pantomime, etc.? Still, such defects may in fact be unavoidable at this early stage. It is a pity, nevertheless, that Hildebrand’s distinctions have not been more widely known, since they constitute a powerful instrument for discovering, pace Hildebrand, the variable nature of human actions.

Table 2. Comparison between theatre, ritual, and sport (according to Olle Hildebrand)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Sport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expression/Content</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sign function)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage/Audience</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Spectacular function)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 From Intentionality to Intent

As we noted above (in section 3), intentionality in the phenomenological sense is not the same as having a purpose. It is simply the notion of being focused on some particular object: when you perceive, there is something you perceive, when you remember, there is something you remember, and so on. Nevertheless, it may be possible to conceive the everyday notion of intention as a special case of intentionality, when the scope of intentionality goes beyond the particular object, and more specifically, action, to something beyond it, as, in this case, a goal to be attained. At first glance, this description may seem to be sufficient to characterize instrumental action and/or practice, but it still doesn’t tell us how to establish the difference between tool use and sport. Thus, we still do not have any clear way of distinguishing what Greimas called practice and what he termed “playful gesture”. When more closely scrutinized, however, this definition turns out to be even more problematic: the definition of the sign, or, in other terms, the act of conveying signs, also supposes some kind of intentionality going beyond what is immediately experienced. Many scholars have indeed chosen to explain the sign function in terms of tool use. Without denying the analogy, it is important to attend to the differences.

Elsewhere, I have defined the sign function in the following terms:

- the sign contains (a least) two parts (expression and content) and is as a whole
relatively independent of that for which it stands (the referent);

- these parts are *differentiated from the point of view of the subjects involved* in the semiotic process, even though they may not be so objectively, i.e. in the common-sense *Lifeworld* (except as signs forming part of that *Lifeworld*);
- there is a *double asymmetry* between the two parts, because one part, expression, is *more directly experienced* than the other;
- and because the other part, content, is *more in focus* than the other;
- the sign itself is subjectively differentiated from the referent, and the referent is (at the moment of meaning-making) more indirectly known than any part of the sign.

The question which must concern us at present is how this is different from goal-directed action. Let us start by admitting that goal-directed action may be of different kinds: even if we except, for the moment, actions having no (visibly) perceptible (but still significant) manifestations, some actions have a meaning in themselves (or, as we will say below in section 5.1, they have a *plastic* meaning), but other actions get their meaning from the effects they produce, whether it is a hole in the ground, or an artefact, which, in its turn, may be a tool, which serves to initiate other actions, a depiction, or, in more modern terms, a design object.

If we could genuinely perceive basic actions, then it would seem that there must be some differentiation between the action and its goal. Admittedly, if the result of the action is a hole in the ground, or even an independent object, such as an “object of art”, in the sense of archaeology, or a tool, then the result of the action is differentiated from the action. But the goal is not the result of the action (after all, the result is not necessarily the one which was anticipated, or rather “protained,” as Husserl would say, by the action), but an aspect of the *Gestalt* we see in the action. In this respect, it is comparable (but different from) what James Gibson (1982) has called the *affordances* of an object, those actions to which the object lends itself, such as being grasped, eaten, and so on. Just as the affordance is something we apprehend as a property immediately given in the perception of the object, the goal is directly experienced as a property of the action. In fact, there is a potentially close relationship between some goals and affordances. Many affordances are clearly “natural”, that is, they follow directly from the anatomical relationship of the human being as an animal living in a certain “niche”. This applies to graspsability, which is property very much dependent on the shape of human hands. Edibility, on the other hand, may have more to do with the specific socio-cultural lifeworld in which we live, which determines whether frogs, rats and insects are edible or not. Certain other affordances, however, are clearly the result of goals being accomplished, such as is notably the case with tools. The hammerability of the hammer or, to take a more complex case, the affordance of the potter’s wheel, no matter how we describe it, is the result of “remote
intentions” or, if you like, “derived agency” (See further Mendoza-Collazos and Sonesson 2021).

Phenomenologically, then, there is no differentiation and no asymmetry between the action and the goal. In fact, between the different actions purporting to reach a goal, and the goal itself, there is (at least in the case of success) precisely the kind of temporal continuity which is lacking in the experience of the sign. As Robert Sokolowski (1978) has pinpointed – quite unaware, it would seem, at the time, of Jacques Derrida’s ideological critique, and rightly so – a lot in phenomenology has to do with the play of presence and absence. In this case, the difference between the sign and the goal-directed action, hinges on their distinctive relations to temporality, that is, in other terms, how they appear in the stream of consciousness.

Be that as it may, in the present paper our task is to account for the different ways in which actions may be experienced. The distinction established in more or less similar terms by Mukařovský and Greimas between instrumental action and action whose meaning is self-contained is intuitively appealing, but it is clearly insufficient. Since reflex actions, whether innate or learned, are not part of what we are trying to make sense of here, all actions must be considered to have a (however implicit) goal. All actions are also, at least in part, bodily actions. Of course, the bodily part of the actions goes from the total acrobatic act to the mere pressing of a button. This is certainly one of the features of variation which serve to distinguish different kinds of actions.

Nevertheless, the fundamental distinction has to do with the chain of continuity of our actions. What is common to theatre, sport, and ritual, is that the action takes place in a reserved space, a “frame”, in the sense of Erving Goffman (1974), or a “finite province of meaning”, as characterized by Alfred Schütz (1962). In a certain sense, we could say that the sporting event and the rite, as well as theatrical play, do not have their objective outside their own sphere: what is achieved there must be achieved precisely in the terms of the kind of sport, rite, or drama. But nowadays when one of the surest ways to get rich is to be successful in sports, that description seems rather absurd. And by definition the rites are supposed to have consequences outside the ritual place and time.

No doubt, the success of a theatrical presentation, a sport event, and even, at least in the imagination of the audience, a ritual, has consequences outside of the event contained in that secluded space: authors or actors involved with the production of the play became famous, a football team advances on the list of some sportive competition (and their most resplendent star may get a statue already in life: see Sonesson 2019b, 2020), or the goods may hear your plea. But this is a result of all that has occurred within the frame of all the actions realized, not a
continuous result of any of the specific actions taking place within this frame. In the rather vague sense in which Goffman uses the notion of frame, it might be argued that the examples we scrutinized above (in section 3.2), notably that of writing a check, could be characterized in those very terms. Indeed, to paraphrase Leibnitz, Husserl, and, more recently Horst Bredekamp (2008), the signing of the check, might be said to constitute a monad with half-open windows. The signing of the check is certainly a complex event which only makes sense on the basis of different other actions, institutions, and instances of habitus, but it still is a part of one privileged “finite province of meaning”, the Lifeworld, or, in other terms, everyday life. In this sense, it could be said that theatre, sport, ritual, and the like constitute monads with half-closed windows. This is, of course, a very metaphorical way of putting it, but it will have to do for the present, pending further phenomenological explorations.

4.2. The spectacular function

My original preoccupation with the semiotics of action was brought about by an interest in classical ballet and what is known in the art sphere as “happening” and “performance” (See Sonesson 2000, 2009a). I wanted to understand how these activities relate to the Prague School's conception of the semiotics of theatre, which, in my view, is the only one which is theoretically informed. According to Mukařovský, the theatre should be seen as an extremely complex system of meaning, in which different functions have dominated at different times. A dominant, as understood by the Prague School, is an element in a structure which not only predominates over others, but also redefines the latter in such a way as to serve its own purposes. A possible dominant in this structure is the spectacular function, which results in the division between the stage and the audience (or more accurately, between those who watch and those who are watched). At other times, according to Mukařovský, the role of the actor, the text, etc., predominates.

Nevertheless, I think that the split between those who act and those who watch, whatever the focus of interest at different historical periods, is what is central to the very notion of theatre. Analogically, it can be said that in classical ballet as well as in modern dance, it is the spectacular function which is dominant. Ballroom dancing is something else, and children’s dance as a subject taught in school is still something different. The boundaries between genres are not entirely clear either: folk dances which were a worthwhile activity in themselves in traditional society have now become a kind of spectacle. This also applies to Flamenco which we now normally experience as a show. Classical ballet, like African dances, and the like, becomes an activity (more or less) independent of the spectacular function for those who take dance lessons in their spare time.
The spectacular function actually already exists in everyday life, for example in the streets, squares, cafes, etc. It is, in fact, the asymmetric character of the spectacular function that is fundamental: the division between those who watch and those who are watched. In public space generally, the spectacular function is at least potentially reciprocal, and it is intermittent, rather than focused for a long time on the same object (See Sonesson 2003; Sonesson and Sandin 2016). Even in the ritual, there may certainly be instances of the spectacular function; often there is a separation, as in the theatre, between those who perform the rite and those who only participate, such as between the priest and the Christian community. In other words, there is a difference between those who only watch, and those who are also subject to the gaze of others. In the ritual, therefore, there is no one who is only the object of the gaze, but nonetheless some among these subjects of the gaze are also its objects. The officiant experiences the action he performs for himself just as he offers it to others: if it is a blessing, for example, this also applies to himself. In contrast, the actor participates in the show in a completely different way than the way audiences do. Even if we imagine rites of a kind where the distinction between the officiant and the participants is dissolved in a collective intoxication (more Dionysian than Apollonian), there will still remain the spectacular function of the participants without which the rite is devoid of meaning.

The representation of dance, as well as theatre, embodies an asymmetrical spectacular function with a clear separation between the viewers and those being watched (which does not prevent the latter, as well as the former, from being able to exceed the limits of their own spaces assigned in a secondary way). Ballroom dancing is more like a ritual from this point of view: the spectacular function is not normally in a dominant position, and if it does occur, it is symmetrical, involving the participant as both viewer and as watched. Like all children's games, children’s dance is similar in these respects to ballroom dancing.

Jurij Lotman (1976) has been concerned, in several papers, with the theatrical conduct of a group of Russian poets, the Decembrists, presenting it as something which serves to “semiotize” daily life. “Semiotization” cannot here mean to introduce a division between expression and content. Rather, attention is directed onto something that happens in ordinary life, making it stand out from the chain of everyday behaviour. Although these actions are integrated into the nexus of cause and effect characterizing everyday life, they appear to have been extracted from it. In these respects, the behaviour of the Decembrists is comparable to that of our romantics, dandies, Dadaists, Surrealists, and Situationists, as well as the more recent skinheads and punks. This amounts to creating a division between stage and audience, that is, an asymmetric and relatively fixed spectacular function in the middle of ordinary life.
From this point of view, happenings, performances, and events, as these terms as used in art critical discourse, are quite the opposite of the acts of Decembrists. I won’t enter into the details of this analysis, which I have done elsewhere (See Sonesson 2000). The important point, in the present context, however, is that while the theatre normally implies a concurrent division between the physical scene and the space of the audience, and between those being watched and those watching, the Decembrist type of act established the latter distinction, where the former does not exist, but happenings, performances, and the like, takes for granted the space division, and thus entices us to divide unto those watching and those being watched, although nothing ordinarily considered worth watching is presented on the scene. There are two caveats: most of the time, happenings and performances are not presented on the theatre, but in an art gallery, but the latter is also a space where we normally go to watch the result of what others have done, not what they do in front of us, although we now had more than a century to get accustomed to this innovation. Second, it may be true that the whole point of the original happenings were to make you watch ordinary action being played out in front of you as if they were worth observing (although some of the early happenings already were concerned to produce absurd combination of features), but, more recently, performances such as those realized by Marina Abramović, rather have the effect of bringing dramatic events, which most of us only watch on the movies, into our real life.

5 The Meaning of Movement

It has been argued, in classical narratology by, notably, Gérard Genette and Gerald Prince (1995), and more recent by the neuroscientist Merlin Donald (1991), that only language that can tell a story. In fact, already the reproduction of a sequence of actions can accomplish a narrative function, as soon as this sequence is perceived as being a representation rather than as instantiating real action (as in the film and the theatre). Dance can also be understood as a means of narrative expression, at least in the case of classical ballet and certain genres of modern dance. But narrativity only exists in this case thanks to the narrative strategies that we apply to the dance, either because we know the intrigue before, or because we are able to interpret the sign language of ballet, or because we recognize the representation of certain gestures and actions (for example, the use of the knife, etc. in "Giselle").

5.1 The Secondary Iconicity of Dancing

Elsewhere, I have proposed to make a distinction between primary iconicity, where the experience of a similarity leads to the discovery of the sign function of the sign (for example in the case of pictures), and secondary iconicity, when it is only because we recognize the presence
of a sign function and are led to identify the aspects to which it applies that we can discover similarity (Sonesson 1996). This last case can be illustrated by the kind of schematic sketches that are sometimes called "droodles", in which it is only thanks to the title that we see that a constellation of lines represents a Martini glass in which we let fall an olive, or a girl in a bikini observed through a peephole (see Figure 4). In a picture, the properties of expression and content that are perceived to be the same are so defined and delimited that they can only correspond to one content, at least from a human point of view. In a “droodle”, on the other hand, the expression corresponds to a class (not clearly delimited) of different contents, with the same structural characteristics, which can only be determined by adding further information to it, for example by means of a convention.

Most of the iconicity in dancing is secondary. Dance does not immediately and obviously represent certain phenomena or certain activities in reality. Rather, it shares some abstract characteristics with an indeterminate and not clearly delimited class of these phenomena and transactions. It is the reading of the libretto or the prior knowledge of the story that allows us to decide what dance represents in a specific case. But at the same time that dance is undetermined in the representation of action, it is overdetermined in a corresponding measure. In classical ballet almost all elements lack interpretation from a narrative and iconic point of view. Here is an example: depending on the case, a pas de deux can mean that the man and the woman are talking to each other, exchanging kisses, hugging each other, making love, etc., but very little in the way of the observable behaviour can really be explained from this sign function. It is precisely what cannot be explained in a narrative and iconic way that seems to be most specific to dancing.

Figure 4: Droodle instantiating secondary iconicity (a), and depiction, instantiating primary iconicity (b).
A very special property of verbal language, which it perhaps only shared with certain kinds of gestures (where the term is not used in Greimas’ or Danto’s sense, but in that of ordinary language), is that it can be used to create a dialogue, that is, it allows individuals to exchange similar signs with each other. Theatre is – as the Prague School pointed out – special in that it allows us, the audience, as a third party, to observe two other people having a conversation, without conversing with them (although they occasionally converse with us, often in the theatre since the 60s, as well as in some dance works, e.g. those of William Forsythe). But what we observe from our position as the third part of dancing is not really a conversation instantiated by dancing. Neither in a *pas de deux* nor when the hero and heroine alternately present their bravery pieces one can speak of a conversation, at most an interaction. The exception, this time too, is obviously when the "sign language" of ballet is employed. At most, we can consider certain dance movements as metaphors for a dialogue.

Dance contains meanings of different kinds, but none of these meanings is in a dominant position: it is in the specific plastic values of the movement patterns (e.g. in the contrast between classical ballet and modern dance developed by pioneers such as Graham, Duncan, etc.) that reside the meanings specific to dance. This fact places us in front of an enormous task of analysis, comparable to the elucidation of the *plastic* layer, as opposed to the *depictive* one, in pictures. As Jean-Marie Floch (1985) aptly put it, the plastic layer of a picture consists of those meanings which the picture would still have if it didn’t depict anything, that is, if it were an “abstract work of art”.1 But there are reasons to think that these meanings are not necessarily arbitrary, but may be iconically, and in part synaesthetically, motivated, both in pictures and in dancing (See Sonesson 1987, 1989, 2004, 2012, 2013).

The study of proxemics, as classically defined by Edward T. Hall (1959), is concerned with the subject as a body occupying the central position of space, in relation to which all cultures define their public, social, personal and intimate, spheres, but differently for differently in different cultures. When subjects coming from different cultures meet, their respective spaces tend to clash. According to one of Hall’s classical examples, a person from an Arab culture, who posits himself within what is from his point of view the personal sphere, the distance from which it is comfortable to have a chat, inadvertently enters the intimate sphere of a Westerner, the sphere in which it is only proper to “fight or make love” (See Figure 5).

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1 Floch opposes the plastic layer to the iconic one, which is unfortunate, since iconicity is so much more than depiction, and can clearly also be manifested in the plastic layer. See further below in section 5.3! Sheets-Johnstone (2015) uses the term "plastic" repeatedly, without defining it, but it seems clear that she doesn’t use it any such specific meaning.
Figure 5. The body envelope and its surrounding proxemic spheres (as illustrated in (Sonesson 2007)). The arrows illustrate entries through designated openings and through the closed borders, respectively.

The proxemic space between the dancers (as opposed to the relation to the audience) is special in dancing. In classical ballet, intimate distance can mean public distance and vice versa. In ballet, people quickly come to intimate distances (e.g., the lifting of the female prima donna), while intimate distances are often "depicted" using large ones (pas de deux, etc.). When it comes to free dance, it is naturally more difficult to generalize. The balcony scene in MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet seems at least as "intimate" as the scene in Julia's bedroom: that is, it is difficult to know which occurs in the sphere in which lovemaking and fighting take place. The relationship of dance to everyday practice is also fuzzy: There can be real actions, such as pulling out real knives, knocking on doors, etc. And there can be real balconies, or the balcony can be represented by a few steps rising of the scene. On the other hand, at least classical ballet cannot do without some instrumental actions: when the (usually) male dancer lifts his partner, the act of lifting may not have an interpretation in the spectacle, but the uplifted position of the (usually) female dancer stands for some position closer to the sky, in one or other metaphysical and/or emotional sense. In modern dance, it may well happen that the soloists lift each other mutually, amounting some kind of joint somersault. However, also in MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet this mutuality of actions clearly serves to express tenderness.

According to the Prague school view of the theatre, it transforms things and practices into signs and gestures, and it turns signs into signs-of-signs and gestures into gestures-of-gestures. In the same way, dance may sometimes be a sign-for-dance, especially when peasant girls dance
at the court in Giselle, or when couples of different nationalities dance at the wedding parties in Swan Lake, Don Quixote, and in the Nutcracker, etc. These are clear instances of iconicity, and, more specifically, depiction. But these examples do not go very far to explaining the way in which dancing conveys meaning.

5.2 An Example: The Balcony Scene in Romeo and Juliet

For our purpose, it is fortunate that the choreography of (more or less) classical ballet is not written down as a score, as in the case of music. This means that different choreographers may use different means (even within the limits set by classical ballet) to tell the same story. Thus, Sergei Prokofiev’s musical score to the ballet “Romeo and Juliet” was given one interpretation by Kenneth MacMillan (at the London Royal Opera House with the Royal Ballet in 1965) and another one by Rudolf Nureyev (at the London Coliseum with the London Festival Ballet in 1977). It is useful to think of these differences at being, at least in part, cases of rhetorical transgressions, or at least modifications, of everyday proxemics.2

From the spectator’s perspective, classical ballet is an art best savoured from a distance. Thus, everyday gestures, and, in particular, face expressions, cannot be expected to play any big part. But there are exceptions: in the scene when Giselle goes insane, the whole ballet troupe turn their heads more or less away, thus manifesting a mixture of distancing and interest.3 In Macmillan's version of Romeo and Juliet (as testified to in the version recorded with The Royal Ballet in 1984, contrary to the video recording of Nureyev’s version at the Paris Opera in 1995) Julia constantly looks at Romeo with an expressive face when he dances solo and vice versa – on video this can perfectly be seen, but also from a distance perspective we see at least the position of the head.

In MacMillan’s interpretation, overall, Romeo and Juliet either dance together, with Romeo often lifting Juliet and moving her around in the air, generally in a quite original way; or one of them dances while the other sits down and watches the one dancing with his/her eyes riveted on the dancer. Thus, it seems, tenderness/love is expressed by means of a direct (but drawn-out and repeated) depiction of the corresponding movements/touches in reality. In Nureyev’s interpretation, on the other hand, the distances between the dancers are, except for brief moments, largely maintained. The two dancers execute their bravura-pieces

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2 The comparison of MacMillán’s and Nureyev’s choreographies derive from my intervention at a course on movement and dancing given at the Department of Art History at Lund University in 2003 and 2004 and never published before. Further down, I will refer to the version of Mats Ek, which was not yet available at the time.

3 At the Bolshoi Theater 1990, with a new choreography by Juri Grigorovich – not in the American Ballet Theater version 1969 choreographed by David Blair.
independently. Often, with some exception, one presents his/her showpiece directly after the other. Proxemically, then, distance is maintained. As such, the dance is hardly iconic for anything, if it is not for one trying to impress the other. Nevertheless, on the stage the iconicity between the two dancers' movements can be interpreted as an indirect sign of closeness/interplay/concordance, or at least a willingness to attain it.

It is obvious that without knowing beforehand the meaning of the scene we would not have any reason to entertain this interpretation: we could very well take the proxemic distance as well as the touches, for what they are, and thus perceive this as a somewhat stylized intercourse scene. Here, too, it must be said that knowledge of the story is crucial. That the male and female solo dancers (or even several members of the ballet corps) dance one after the other in an identical fashion is a common routine in ballet. It is only within this interpretive framework that the proposed interpretation makes sense.

Let us now have a look at one concrete scene of the ballet, the balcony scene. In MacMillan’s choreography, the scene is delimited by "real life" gestures: at the beginning, Juliet stands on the balcony and Romeo stands below, and both stretch their arms towards the other without being able to make contact, and at the end they give each other a "real" kiss, then return to the balcony position while stretching their arms. Here we thus have depictive iconicity, but what is depicted are gestures for contact and love. Between the two hand extensions, there are a lot of movements that cannot be interpreted as thus directly depicting and that are repeated for a long time without taking the story any further. Between the two icons for distance there is an instance of proximity, but it is not Romeo who climbs up to Juliet on the balcony, but Juliet who comes down to the stage.

In Nureyev’s version, there is no balcony, but just a few elevated steps, which may well represent the balcony at the beginning, but then quickly lose their role. We thus have a form of abstract iconicity for height, Juliet being (a little) higher up than Romeo, that is, there is a distance, but it is not implemented in the following dance movements. There are actually several "real" kisses, but only in passing, when the two dancers happen to meet in their dance movements. In this sense, there is less of a play between distance and proximity than in MacMillan's choreography.

It may seem more hazardous to compare MacMillan's and Nureyev’s choreographies to that of Mats Ek, since the latter is based on the score of Tchaikovsky (as premiered at the Royal Swedish Opera, Stockholm, in 2013). Nevertheless, since both Prokofiev’s and Tchaikovsky’s scores are based on Shakespeare’s drama, it is possible to retrieve the balcony scene. Without going into any details, it can be observed that Ek’s version multiplies the possible ways of
expressing proximity, using hands, arms, whole bodies, and the lifting of the other. It is only at
the end of the scene that the idea of distance is conveyed, first by Juliet being lifted up (an
instrumental action, but not by means of the other dancer, but clearly using some hidden
machinery), and then by Romeo being lifting as well. If this suggests the position of Juliet on
the balcony, it clearly goes on to indicate some much broader meaning of height.

It might be said that, in Ek’s version, the iconic features of the balcony scene are reduced
to the maximum: the position of Juliet on the balcony, above Romeo, is only indicated at the
end, when Juliet is lifted up. But even this meaning is then ironically annulled when Romeo
goes through the same procedure. There is, on the other hand, abundant ways in which
proximity is conveyed, most of them, however, with no clear iconic interpretation. Instead, they
signify on the plastic level. We could think of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980)
call “orientational metaphors”, which was somewhat more adequately renamed “primary
metaphors” by Joseph Grady (1997), but which in fact are no metaphors at all: rather, they are
directly perceived meanings of the Lifeworld, the world taken for granted (See Sonesson
2019d). Thus, for instance:

Happy is up; sad is down. /---/ Conscious is up; unconscious is down. /---/ Health
and life are up; sickness and death are down. /---/ Having control or force is up;
being subject to control or force is down. /---/ More is up; less is down. /---/
Foreseeable future events are up and ahead. /---/ High status is up; low status is
down. /---/ Good is up; bad is down. /---/ Virtue is up; depravity is down. /---/
Rational is up; emotional is down. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 462 ff.).

And many other examples could be added to this. It is best understood, I submit, as the
contrast between the upward and downward movements of the human body, and/or the ecology
of the human Lifeworld, where the sky is up, and the earth is down. In other words, what James
Gibson (1982) called ecological physics, and which Husserl well before termed the Lifeworld.
Even those movements which have a depictive interpretation are also fatally plastic.

5.3 The Plastic Meaning of Movement

In his book about “happenings”, Michael Kirby (1965, 1969) also mentions a curious variety
of the former, which he calls “activity”. In this case, people receive the task of going to different
places and of doing different things, but they cannot see each other, and nobody else is watching
them. They are themselves the only possible spectators. Considered as a difference from the
theatre, this goes further than the ritual, in which there is no unique, extern and fixed, position
of the spectator; here there is only an internal spectacular position, directed to the own subject
(or several positions of that same type, if we understand “activity” as the sum total of all the
things that the different persons do). This is strangely similar to what today is often called
LARP, Live Action Role Play, which is periodically realized during a whole day, or several ones, by groups of “fantasy”-enthusiasts. In LARP, exactly as in the theatre, a script is written, and each person is assigned a part; however, more than the theatre, LARP resembles Kirby’s “activity” in that different persons realize their task in different parts of the landscape, at least part of the time being out of view of the others, without no one watching but themselves. LARP certainly seems to have more of a narrative matrix than an “activity”, which in this sense is more similar to a “happening”, but, on the other hand, the large number of participants and the long duration of the play has the effect of allowing less context than in a theatre piece. Like life itself, LARP lacks a central stage where the spectacular function may be focused, and where all the events come together.

But it is, of course, possible to conceive any piece of action as being experienced by the actor him/herself. When people take dance lessons, or when they play football on the village green, it is not necessarily because they hope one day to be a prima donna or a football star, but because they think the activity is rewarding in itself. If you exercise in a gym, or if you regularly go out running in the park, you probably don’t do that because you want others to admire you (quite the contrary), but because you get some pleasure out of it yourself (if you don’t do it in the hope of growing thinner, of course).

If I understand correctly, this is what Parlebas (1999) calls “semiotricity”: the “nature et champ des situations motrices envisagées sous l’angle de la mise en jeu de systèmes de signes directement associés aux conduites motrices des participants” (where “signs” must, of course, be understood in a much wider sense that that defined in section 4.1). As such, this is an experience at the level of introspection, rather than phenomenology (in the sense of Table 1). We can, nevertheless, work at transforming such experiences into phenomenological research, looking for the invariants. This may turn out to be difficult. It may be remembered that Roger Caillois (1958) distinguished four categories of games and/or play: simulacrum which consists in imitating real-life action within a fictive frame; agôn, manifested for example by football; chance, as in lottery and other games of chance; and finally ilinx or vertigo, which concerns the experience one can have of one’s own organic states, where one must probably include everything between the child’s roller coaster ride and the intoxication of the drug addict. But, clearly, any participant in a simulacrum, agôn, or chance, may him/herself experience the action as ilinx.

In sport, agôn takes precedence, but there are elements of agôn in dance and acrobatics as well without being predominant. Dance, at least in the form of ballet and part of modern dance, contains simulacrum, often in narrative form (as we saw above, in section 5.2), but again
without this element having a real priority. Circus and ballet have one thing in common with theatre and children’s “symbolic play”: their value consists in the action as such, in all its details and as it is perceived and/or experienced. The sporting event and all other types of *agôn*, on the other hand, derive their value from the result they can achieve, and this is also the case of the rite as it is experienced by the participants. They are instrumental actions, means to achieve a goal. As a practice the rite occupies a paradoxical position: it does not change the world in physical terms (at any rate, it does not do so in a fundamental way) but in a sort of "spiritual" way. You could say that what the rite changes in the world is its interpretation. Nevertheless, there may surely be a piece of *ilinx* to the sporting event as well as to the ritual.

What then is contained in the experience of one’s own action, in case of the sport event, the act of dancing or acting, and the ritual? Basically, these must be *kinesthesia* in Husserl’s sense, the experience of one’s own bodily movements. Thus, it must have a lot to do with “physiognomics”, in the sense of Werner and Kaplan, as I have discussed it elsewhere (See Sonesson 2013). But this interior experience will no doubt also contains elements of *simulacrum*, *agôn*, or *chance*, possibly as viewed from within the perspective of *ilinx*. Moreover, it will include the personal experience of the specific rules of the game, and even, more broadly, of the place of the game within contemporary society, that is, in Parlebas’s (1999) terms, a semiotric vision of ethnomotricity, where the latter stands for the “champ et nature des pratiques motrices envisagées sous l’angle de leur rapport à la culture et au milieu social au sein desquels elles se sont développées”.

When you watch a dance performance, a huge amount of the experience is certainly based on your living through the *kinestheses* produced by the dancers as they perform. Whether or not this can all be explained by the mirror neurons is not our present concern. It is nevertheless interesting that Khatia Chikhladze (2021) found a correlation between the difference between introspective reports of the viewers and the measures of skin conductance and respiration as they watched classical ballet as opposed to contemporary dance.⁴ According to what we have said above, one should not expect any similar reaction on the part of the audience of a sporting event. Since there is a goal to be reached, the audience will probably rather live through some kind of suspense, more like that in watching a thriller, which the sportsman had better not experience if he/she is going to perform his/her task. Still, there is no denying the fact that also the public of a sporting event may derive some pleasure from empathizing with the plastic

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⁴ The difference was more pronounced in the case of viewers familiar with these genres, but, whether this shows the intervention of a higher degree of consciousness, as the author claims, is something we will not discuss at present.
aspects of the sportsmen’s action. Terms such as “samba football” suggest that the style of action is still important, though hardly at the level of detail of dancing.

Here, once again, is where the Prague School notion of dominant is fundamental: in dancing, all elements of the action are organized by plasticity, which does not mean that other factors, such as depictive iconicity, may not intervene, but only on the conditions set by plasticity. In the sporting event, the factor organizing everything is the goal of winning the game, but other features play a part, including the plasticity of actions. In the theatre, iconicity, in the specific sense of depiction and/or narrativity, is the dominant, but this does not mean that plasticity does not have a part to play. As we saw above, Jan Mukařovský argued that the dominant of theatre changes at different periods. Looking back on the beginning of the 20th century, he was no doubt right to think so, and if he had lived to observe it (and not had been silenced by the Stalinist regime), he would have been able to confirm this tendency of theatre breaking out of its bounds, while dance performance broke the barrier from its other side. Even now in the 21st century, we, or at least the institutions which are responsible for them, conceive theatre and dancing to be two very different kinds of activities. So far, nevertheless, there is no risk of confusing any of them with the sporting event.

6. Conclusion

In my earlier papers of the semiotics of action, I have gone into more details about the similarities and differences between ritual, theatre, sport, circus acts, dance and practice (See Sonesson 2000; 2009a). This paper has been more specifically concerned with the part played by depictive iconicity and plasticity in different kinds of actions, notably in dance, sport, and theatre. Before we even started on this task, we had to spell out some difference between the sign function and the action having a goal, both of which are special cases of intentionality, in the phenomenological sense of being directed to an object. Our journey took us from the idea of basic actions to that of actions as Gestalten, which, as basic actions, may be physically identical, but which are perceived as different according as they are determined by the inner and/or outer context of the action. Mukařovský’ definition of the shifting dominants of theatre, as well as Hildebrandt attempt at separating theatre, ritual, and sport using two dichotomies, have been of much help, but they leave too many differences unaccounted for. Using different approaches, including a close analysis of the balcony scene in the choreographies of “Romeo and Juliet”, by MacMillan, Nureyev, and Ek, I have explored the way meaning is created in classical ballet, contrasting it as far as possible with theatre, ritual, sports events, and other bodily actions. As always in phenomenology, this is only the beginning of an infinite task.
References


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