

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v9i2.2694

Citation: Voronovskaya, O. (2020). Gesture phenomenon: From Ontological-Conceptual Status to Aesthetic Category. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 9(2), 417-424. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v9i2.2694>

Gesture phenomenon: From Ontological-Conceptual Status to Aesthetic Category

Olga Voronovskaya¹

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to cover the phenomenon of gesture in a wide range of its consideration as the inseparable integrity of the content and form of the subject, which is expressed in a space-time dimension; identifying patterns of gesture existence in various aspects of human life and in art; comprehending the gesture as an aesthetic category that embraces both the different types of art and the branches outside of it - psychology, philosophy, aesthetics. The research methodology is based on a complex approach, which makes it possible to consider the phenomenon of gesture as a "fragment object" of scientific reality in a wide range. The scientific novelty of the research lays in referring to the gesture as a semiotic object that has three semiotic functions: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic.

It was concluded in the study that gesture, as a fact of culture, acts simultaneously as a phenomenon of culture, which reveals itself not only as a sphere of gesture display but also as an environment of its existence and functioning. Today the study of gesture in art has evolved into a particular area of science with rich traditions and numerous scientific schools where the gesture is considered as a component of an integrated language system and as an important component in the creation and perception of art.

Keywords: Gesture, Body movement, Sign language, Expressive gesture, Musical gesture.

¹ PhD in Arts, Associate Professor of the department of Musical Art and Choreography of K. D. Ushynsky South Ukrainian National Pedagogical University. Email: okovorona@gmail.com

Relevance of the research topic

The course of history in studying the question of the human body significance resembles a pendulum: after the body-oriented antiquity, the disembodied concept of man and culture prevailed in the 18th century. In the 20th century rethinking of physicality takes place in many sciences. The French philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty put forward the idea of man in the world as a body that possesses consciousness and defines its being with the help of the body, which is the incorporation of the universe (Merlot Ponti, 1992). M. Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenological Body" provides for a constant dialogue between man and the world and the source of any sense lies in the human animated body. Since the end of the 80s of the last century, there has been a growing interest in the study of expressive gesture in Western musicology, as well as in psychology, semiotics, neuroscience and other related fields. Over the past decade and a half, the growth of these studies has led to a real "scientific boom" in the quantity and quality of scientific works and scientific and creative organizations.

The purpose of the study is to identify the complexity and multidimensionality of the categories "movement" and "musical movement"; study of their etymology, various definitions; analysis of their interaction due to human biological nature; carrying out a comparative characteristic and delineation of the definitions "movement in music", "musical development", "musical plasticity", "musical maturity".

Analysis of research and publications

The current state of the development of the problem of gesture in science is characterized by the emergence of many social organizations and individual scientific research. So, in the University of Chicago a gesture lab operated by David MacNeil has been functioning for several years. In 2002 the International Society for the Study of Gesture was founded, publishing its "Gesture" magazine and having an extensive international program (www.gesturestudies.com). The founder of the European direction was Marcel Maus and his essay "Body Techniques" (1936). In the future, the study of gesture developed particularly intensively in two areas: anthropological and ethnographic. After David Efron defended his dissertation "Gestures, Races, Cultures" in 1941 (Columbia University), the direction began to develop in the United States. The interdisciplinary research is characteristic for the current state of knowledge about the gesture. One of the representatives of this study was Fernando Poyatos, who studied non-verbal communication in literature, known as "literary anthropology". Roman Katsman speaks of "imaginary anthropology," where a character acquires his essence through a description of habits, rituals, and cultural practices. As a result, "we find a gesture" in the center of the system (2008). At the moment, art historians A. Arustamyan (1999) and T. Tsaregradskaya (2018) are engaged in the study of gesture issues in the field of theatrical and musical arts in Russia.

The main presentation of the material

The French poststructuralists made a great contribution to the comprehensive rethinking of physicality. So R. Barthes (1985) examines the interaction of gesture and music in his later works. He describes music as "a field of attribution, but not a system of signs" because "the body is the referent" and "the body enters music without intermediaries, as significant" (Barthes, 1985, p. 312). Body and gesture are connected through action. R. Barthes means "gesture" as "an indefinite and inexhaustible set of causes, impulses, inertia which give an atmosphere to the action" (1985, p. 312). Barthes states: "Let's distinguish a message that carries information, a sign

that activates intellectual activity from a gesture that forms everything else ... without an intention to form anything" (1985, p. 160).

The conclusion that can be drawn from Barthes' text is as follows: the gesture is ahead of the sign, it is the most direct physical "movement" limited in time and space, endowed with expressive meaning and coming from an irrational message. R. Barthes (1985) sees the gesture as a source and carrier of the artistic impulse in any kind of art.

The ideas about the gesture, which were formed in various spheres of life, reveal significant differences in the terminology itself, which, naturally, complicates its monosemantic application and understanding. In order to get the most complete picture of the gesture, which represents the inconstancy of the human body in its ontogenetic development, and acts as a factor of evolution in phylogenesis which is manifested in historical inconstancy, it is necessary to find the roots of the concept of "gesture", its etymological sources.

The term "gesture" is derived from the Latin "gestus", which means "body position, posture" and indicates a certain type of expressive behavior, especially of the hands (in order to express some feelings). Gestus is "holding yourself" in one of its origins. This expression points to the designation of the gesture, firstly, in its physical, external display as "the setting of the body in space"; secondly, in the inner-volitional (active) principle - "keep yourself in hands". Here we mean the manner of human behavior, that is, the gesture appears as an element of culture in this case that expresses a specific era, a local social way of life.

The notion of gesture was used in the writings of ancient thinkers who viewed it as the physical behavior of a person in everyday life. At the same time, they meant "body" as "some spirit as the root cause of all things that have their limits" (Diogen Laertsky, 1986, p. 290), but arranged in a material volume with three dimensions (length, width, depth). Moreover, it was noted that the existence of this body also requires a soul, which is reflected in the movements of the body.

Sign language acts as a repository of human consciousness, the subconscious and experience, it also contains historical ethno-characteristics. With the help of gestures, ethnocultural information is transmitted along with the verbal language, works of art, writing. According to Yu. Bromley, it is the gesture information that is more important for many ethnic groups (1983). Thus, sign language, being a full language, reflects not only modern culture, but also transmits values to subsequent generations, possessing a cumulative social function.

The definition of the gesture, which is given by L. Belyaevsky, corresponds to similar thesis and also emphasizes its "cleverness": "Gesture is all controlled body movements considered in the world of the human mind" (1987, p. 108). The duality of definition draws attention: not only body movement, but also a deed. Both of these meanings can be understood through the phenomenon of "position": in the first case, this is a space-time change of the body, in the second case it is a public and social one. In the 20th century, this second meaning often takes the form of an "avant-garde gesture".

The related Latin word "gestio" means a display of joy, including jumping ("jump for joy") and jubilation. The French word "le geste" means posture and facial expression, however, it refers both to gait (in walking and dancing) and the action in general. The aspect associated with the action manifests itself in the French word "gesticulation" (the word exists in English and Spanish), which means expressive actions with arms and legs. This aspect of action is present in medieval historical genres, known as the "gesta" (Gesta Romanorum - "Roman acts"). In France chanson de geste became popular, songs of the 12th – 13th centuries, which were performed "with an expression" (with gestures) by professional singers (histrions, jugglers). Consequently, the gesture contains two functions in its external plastic manifestation: in the first (body movement)

- spatial-dynamic and procedural in time, and in the second (body position) - spatial-static, fixed in time. At the same time, the "gesture" is perceived not only as a movement. It is a motor activity that is built on the kinetic base, but no longer comes down to it, because the gesture is immanent in efficacy and significance, which determines its high order of understanding in relation to the "movement".

In modern usage, the concept of gesture is diverse and relates to different areas of action. The gesture may be connected with speech, in this case its motor character is emphasized; a gesture may be associated with a message in the computer sphere. A gesture is characterized primarily as a body movement in the description of sign language.

As it is known, the gesture functions in two aspects, which determine its essential characteristic, it is procedural and has a spiritual and energetic space. V. Dahl (1994) defines a gesture as a language, that is, as a means of expressing the emotional state of a person with the help of signs-movements. He considers that "a gesture is a movement of a person, a dumb language - free or involuntary, the identification of feelings and thoughts with signs and movements" (Dahl, 1994, col. 1334).

Gesture as a symbolic consolidation of spiritual and practical activity of a person in materialized (from pictogram to painting) and in live (from ritual dance to artistic pantomime) forms should be considered as a semiotic notion, while taking into account that the meaning of gestures is not inherent in their structure, despite the fact that the gesture takes the conventionality of the sign structure to itself. Yu. Kristeva also believes that "the gesture conveys a certain message within the group of people, and it can be called "speech" only in this sense; however, the gesture is not only a ready, available message but the process of its development; a gesture is a work preceding the creation of a sign (sense) in the process of communication" (2004, p. 116).

Sign language, which has a visual modality, that according to M. Bakhtin's definition is "the speaking moment of the human body" (1979, p. 26), acquires a reference and metalinguistic function when language communication is impossible and some information delivery is complicated.

The gesture as a body-plastic reality in its real physical manifestation in space is divided into 3 groups: microgesture - physiognomic displays (look, mimicry); mediageature - in the meaning that is most widely used in everyday understanding as hand movements, "manual thinking", that is, a variety of gestural plastic formations; macrogesture is a movement of the whole body, in other words, pantomime.

In psychology, the notion of "gesture" has the equivalent notion of "expressive movement". According to the philosopher V. Prozersky, the gesture is considered as "a part, as an elementary unit of a wider phenomenon - expressive movements" in psychology, sociology, semiotics (1996, p. 46).

A. Arustamyan considers different levels of gestures as a hierarchical system (1999, p. 17). The first level is the image of physiology, motor functions in phylogenesis and ontogenesis, that is, biological. The second level is the primary gesture, that is, the level of life-real actions. The third level is the "secondary" gesture, that is, the level of artistic reflection.

At the biological level, a gesture exists according to biological laws as a natural, organic movement of a living organism in the process of its vital activity, but in developed forms of human intercourse, the gesture acquires a spiritual and expressive meaning, takes in its biomechanical basis. At the same time, at the level of real-life actions, gestures express a specific psychological or physiological state of the subject in their content, being in a certain plastic-expressive form,

and at the next level - the level of artistic reflection - the "secondary" gesture displays intellectual and emotional content of an artistic image, which was also revealed in an adequate gesture form.

Summing up all the considered definitions, we find it possible to add that gesture as a real-bodily formation has the dual nature of existence. This nature is established in the most important value-relevant factors related to the environment, which actually determines the existence and development of the gesture itself: a motor-expressive formal factor and a content one, the potential basis of which has the spiritual determinants of a person.

The study of the gesture as the psychophysical embodiment of the human spirit life has its regular basis in the space of culture. The functioning of the gesture in the field of culture can be conducted from the human activity of the primitive world. Gesture, being the mechanism by which tribesmen entered into communicative relations, formed the specific cultural environment which later contributed to the birth of abstract human thinking. At the same time, the gesture, as a biological natural reality, actively participated in the birth of that new form of "biogeochemical energy that can be called the energy of human culture" (Vernadsky, 1989, p. 226), creating the noosphere. Civilization provided the human body for an opportunity to "speak" and the gesture, as a creation of culture, acquires a linguistic nature.

In the early stages of cultural development the gesture portrayed, reinforced, conveyed human experience, impressions, knowledge, perpetuating vital messages of people in cave paintings and sculptures. With the development of culture, it was a gesture, as a non-verbal instrument of its vital activity, that was a behavioral phenomenon, a means of artistic communication between people.

At the beginning, culture appears as an embodied sign language in the syncretic unity of its form, and at the next stage of culture, civilization, the gesture occupies its deserving half of the niche in semiosis of culture, acquiring significance in the spiritually transforming human activity as a language system along with the sound-verbal one, all that is convincingly shown by M. Kagan in the "Philosophy of Culture". Therefore, culture as a "specific mode of human activity, as a universal technology of its implementation" (Kagan, 1996, p. 6), being the "second nature" created by man, forms a system of gestures that evolve adequately to the social perturbation of society. The gesture acts as an indicator of culture, characterizing its essence and revealing the spiritual climate of the time, it influences both the interpretation of the gesture, which is read from the perspective of a particular epoch, and its functioning at different stages of culture. Therefore, the gesture as a cultural, historical and ethnic formation undergoes the motor-plastic modifications and expresses value reference points in the process of its development, as a value for culture.

The formation of gesture is actualized in the cumulative context of the historical-gesture-social culture, however, the consideration of the gesture would be incomplete outside the artistic manifestation of culture. It is in artistic activity, which is one of the oldest products of culture, that the gesture acts as a tool not only for the spiritual and emotional, but also for the artistic and imaginative mastery of the world.

The gesture, being a body movement at the heart, became an object of art in the very early stages of civilization, since the appearance of rock art. The interactive gesture dynamics is inherent in ancient Egyptian art. Later, it attains a high degree of perfection in ancient sculpture. Sign languages are formed in ancient cultures (for example, in Indian ritual dance). In Zen Buddhism the gesture becomes a symbol. Ancient rhetoric takes the gesture in the actual speech into consideration.

Scientists define the era of the Middle Ages as gestural culture (Le Goff, 2005). The gestures of Adam, Eve, Satan are represented in numerous mysteries of that time (Dunbar, 2001).

Gestures were also actively used by scholastics. In contrast to Eastern traditions, the medieval European gesture has always been focused, addressed to someone. At the end of the XIII century, the study of gesture received the status of science in relation to music and the voice. The Renaissance understanding of the gesture comes to us through the rhetorical gestures of the epoch come to life in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, however, their other understanding, mechanistic, appears along with textbooks on gymnastics and acrobatics.

In general, the field of studying gestures in European culture is most actively developed in the theory of theater. Entering the system of plastic providing of acting arts, the gesture is in close connection with rhetoric. The Baroque epoch provides us with numerous examples of works that explain the role of gesture in oratory and dance arts (Legler & Kubik, 2003).

Plastic movement underlies the synaesthetic theory of J. d'Udin, who believed that all human feelings go back to a unified gesture and tactile basis (2016). The unity of touch and movement forms the plastic foundations of artistic creativity, which is understood as the expression of emotions through bodily movements. This concerns music which is treated as a kind of sign language.

A. Tolstoy (1984) developed a gestural theory of literature and emphasized that a gesture is the basis of the verbal language, and the artistic phrase is a system of gestures. When interpreting "the appearance of a gesture as a result of struggle with nature," he emphasized that every word in a language, every concept contains an image and a rhythmic movement associated with it, which signals to a physical gesture. A. Tolstoy stated that "as soon as the feeling of movement, gesture is lost in the language, an artistic imagery disappears" (1984, p. 47). He writes that "a continuous stream of emotions, feelings, ideas and the physical movements following them permanently move in the human brain. The man is constantly gesticulating. A gesture must always be foreseen (by the artist) as the result of a spiritual movement. The word follows the gesture, the gesture complements the phrase" (1984, p. 52).

If A. Tolstoy (1984) analyzes artistic images as systems of gestures, then A. Belyi (1922) develops this theory, revealing the microstructures of the language. He does not take a phrase or a word as the object of analysis, but sound. "All the movements of the tongue in our oral cavity are gestures of an armless dancer who curls the air like a thin scarf; the ends of the scarf tickle the larynx, flying apart; and a dry, airy, quick "kh" is a gesture of outstretched hands" (Belyi, 1922, p. 126). One cannot but agree with the classical definition of L. Vygotsky: "A gesture is an inscription in the air, and a written sign is very often a fixed gesture" (1983, p. 180).

In painting, sculpture, architecture, we have the opportunity to directly contemplate the lines drawn by gestures, and we recreate them with the help of visual memory in body movements. The authors of the article about the work of the painter A. Osmerkin examine the plastic expressiveness of his paintings and come to the conclusion that the artist paid great attention to the plasticity of color, with which he built form and space (Kirichenko et al., 2020).

Physicality and gesture are considered as an important idea in architecture: the historian and philosopher of architecture A. G. Rappaport points to the "physicality of the architectural space" (2007, p. 17). V. Medushevsky wrote about the lines as a form of pictorial transformation of gestures: "Graphics is a system of gestures in its ultimate purity", "graphics is based on motor feelings..., organizes the motor space" (2003).

Distributing gestures to "primary" and "secondary", A. Arustamyan (1999) names three forms of a "secondary" gesture existence:

- materialized (painting, sculpture, photography);

- descriptive (poetry, prose), where the gesture appears in a plastic-kinetic form in the presentation;

- live dance (dance, pantomime, types of performing arts).

However, in our opinion, this classification unfairly lacks another form of the “secondary” gesture existence — intonation-expressive, mediated by the art of music.

The gesture is a priori peculiar to music of all genres, styles and eras (from ancient chants to the musical avant-garde), in which there is a temporal organization. The gesture in music is present even when the music seems static, “frozen”. This is one of the paradoxes of artistic time - the ability of art to create images of "moving immobility" and the turnaround of time in the musical space.

Modern musicology has developed its definitions of the gesture, represented by two major areas - performing and composing. It is the expression of gesture that apparently led to the understanding of music as “gesture art”, and then not only body movements become gestures, but also those sound structures that arise as a result of these body movements, as well as those that symbolize body movements. In this case expressive phrases can often be perceived as having a gestural (sometimes even choreographic) characteristic. Such constructions are quite frequent; researchers find them in Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert; they are evident in Liszt, Debussy, and, of course, Stravinsky. Bright expressive musical gestures are noticed in Schoenberg and Webern (Schockgesten) by T. Adorno (1978).

Based on the usual understanding of music as the deployment of dynamic processes in time and space, it is absolutely reasonable to assume that the same processes make an impression on the listener, who can sense the intentions to move his body in accordance with the motor impulses in the music. Thus, music induces gestures and action. The study of this musical induction, the interrelation of music and movement, gave a start to such a branch of the humanities as “kinetology”.

Conclusions

The gesture is an amazing concept in terms of the breadth of coverage of multi-subsistence phenomena. Gesture is not only physical but also energetic movement, embodied in everyday life, creation, art - in music, in drawing, in sculpture; mental movement expressed in a formed emotional experience; mental movement revealing itself in the phrase. The unspoken movement, that is, the absence of movement, is also a kind of “gesture”. Thus, the gesture is a component of the integral language system and an important component in the creation and perception of the arts. Gesture, as a fact of culture, acts simultaneously as a phenomenon of culture, which reveals itself not only as a sphere of gesture manifestation but also as an environment of its existence and functioning.

References

- Arustamyan, A. V. (1999). Gesture in art and culture: interdisciplinary analysis. Extended abstract of candidate’s thesis. SPb. State Academy of Theatrical Arts.
- Bakhtin, M. (1979). Aesthetics of verbal creativity. <http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Bahtin/esthetic/>
- Beliy, A. (1922). Golossalogy. A poem about sound. Berlin. <https://rvb.ru/belyi/01text/gloss.htm>
- Belyaevsky, L. (1987). Instrumental music - the transformation of human movements. *Folk musical instruments and instrumental music*, 106-115.

- Bromley, Y. (1983). Essays the Theory of Ethnos. <http://padaread.com/?book=42075&pg=1>
- Vernadsky, V. I. (1989). Biosphere and noosphere. <http://www.spsl.nsc.ru/win/nelbib/vernadsky.pdf>
- Vygotsky, L. (1983). The problem of the development of the psyche. Vol.3.
- Dahl, V. (1994). Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language. Vol.1.
- Diagen Laertsky (1986). On the Life, Teachings and Sayings of Famous Philosophers/ Ed. Tom and auth. entry Art. A.F. Losev; translation by M. Gasparov, 2nd ed.
- d'Udin, G. (2016). Art and gesture: Imitation of natural rhythms. The mechanism of imitative characters. Trans with fr. Ed.2.
- Kagan, M. (1996). Philosophy of Culture. http://www.vir.nw.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Kagan-M.S.-Filosofiya-kultury_filosofiya.pdf
- Kristeva, Yu. (2004). Selected Works: The Destruction of Poetics. Trans. with fr. G.K. Kosheleva and B.P. Narumova.
- Le Goff, J. (2005). The Civilization of the Medieval West. https://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/History/Goff/index.php
- Medushevsky, V. (2003). Intonational form of music: Research.
- Merlot Ponti, M. (1992). The Eye and the Spirit. Trans. with fr. A.V. Gustyrya.
- Prozersky, V. (1996). Gesture as a Meaningful Unit of Nonverbal Communication. *Meaning of Culture*, 46-47.
- Rappaport, A. G. (2007). Five problems of the theory of architecture of the XXI century. *Vestnik of Europe*, № 19-20. <http://magazines.russ.ru/vestnik/2007/19/ra32.html>
- Tolstoy, A. (1984). On literature and art.
- Tsaregradskaya, T. V. (2018). Musical gesture in the space of modern composition.
- Adorno, Th. (1978). Philosophie der Neuen Musik.
- Barthes, R. (1985). The Responsibility of Forms: Critical essays on music, art, and representation.
- Dunbar, H. (2001). Gesture and Characterization in liturgical drama. *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art*.
- Katsman, R. (2008). At the Other End of Gesture. Anthropological Poetics of Gesture in Modern Hebrew Literature.
- Kirichenko, E., Punhina, O., & Malezhyk, Y. (2020). Searching for Plastic Expressiveness in Alexander Osmerkin's Paintings: From "Cezannism" to "Silent Realism". *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 9(1), 209-224. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v9i1.2354>
- Legler, M. & Kubik, R. (2003). Prinzipien and Quellen der barocken Gestik. *Gestik und Affect in der Music der 17 Jahrhundert*.