Gesture

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It. Gesto; Fr. Geste; Germ. Geste; Span. Gesto. Gestures can be defined as movements of the body, which, starting from an intention, create sense by expressing a meaning or by showing their constitution as body motions. The former is the case of gestures that accompany the speech, the second is that of artistic practices such as dance, painting, sculpture and writing or the most recent examples of performative arts (for example happenings and flash mobs). From an aesthetic point of view, gestures are forms of somatic representation and communication extendable to media and/or technical objects.

The Current Debate

The turn of the millennium has marked an increasing interest in gestural practices in philosophical aesthetics, but also in the humanities in general. The first issue of the journal Gesture was published in 2001 and the International Society for Gesture Studies (ISGS) was founded in the following year. Pioneers of this research area with psycholinguistic approaches are Adam Kendon (2004) and David McNeill (2005) who, in spite of the theoretical differences between them, both focus mostly on the pragmatics of gestures in the interaction between verbal and non-verbal communication.

Leroi-Gourhan’s theory of gesture in Le geste et la parole (2. vol., 1964-65), compared to other ethno-anthropological approaches, as for example Marcel Jousse’s L’Anthropologie du geste (1974), contains many interesting elements for philosophical aesthetics, insofar as it conceives gestures and artistic practice as particular moments of specialization of the technologies of the body, by taking distance from the world. Gestures are in this way forms of embodied rationality, which express a relation of distance between body and space.

In media aesthetics and media philosophy the debate has been centered around the reflection of Vilém Flusser’s Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie (1991), in which gestures are understood as
representational forms of states of mind ("Stimmungen"). Unlike other body motions, gestures contain, according to Flusser, a symbolic moment: the “Gestimmtheit”. The latter is neither an emotion nor a sensation or a cognition, but a process of artificialization of mental contents which lose their spontaneity and thus come into the communicative world. In Flusser’s communicology, communication has a double character, because it reveals and conceals the world at the same time.

In a productive interaction between aesthetics and philosophical anthropology, the works of Christoph Wulf (with Fischer-Lichte, 2010) – several of which have also been published in collaboration with Gunter Gebauer (1998) – draft a relational idea of the gesture as (self-)mimesis (“Welt- und Selbstverhältnis”). Gestures materialize a kind of somatic knowledge, consisting in productive-reproductive abilities (the mimesis) that express a non-intentional scenic behaviour. For Wulf gestures visualise a fundamental human mimetic function, which doesn’t simply consist in the ability to copy or recreate the reality, but also has an adaptive goal.

Recently – in a project which began with the chapter Note sul gesto in Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica (1996), was continued by the essay L’autore come gesto (in Profanazioni, 2005) and finally lead to the book Karman. Breve trattato sull’azione, la colpa e il gesto (2017) – Giorgio Agamben has elaborated a conception of the gesture through the analysis of Kant’s Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790), of Foucault’s Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur? (1969) and, indirectly, of Barthes’ La mort de l’auteur (1968). Starting from Kant’s idea of “Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck”, Agamben understands gestural practices (in particular the dance apart from its artistical value) as forms of pure mediality (“pura medialità”). According to Agamben, gestures, above all the artistic ones, don’t aim at the execution of a function; they rather produce an indeterminable space of sense (the pure mediality), embodying potentialities and expressing the totalizing nature of media (first of all, language). In Agamben’s book Karman, gestures become a sort of obstruction (called “inoperosità” in order to revise the post-structuralist reflection about the desœuvrement) of teleological operations. This corrective or negative function of gesture stated by Agamben is often associated with a biopolitical view of the relationships between forms of life and systems of knowledge.

The aesthetic reflections of Jean-Luc Nancy – centered around the body and its power to produce a processual sense based on tensions and interruptions – pay a very particular attention to the gesture in its so-called ontology of the body. In Corpus (2000), gestures constitute the way of making sense. If, for Nancy, bodies are not only biological entities, but also actions and media (re)producing communication and transforming sensibility, gestures hence express the operative way of these somatic interactions through movement. Therefore in Le Plaisir au dessin (2009), Nancy defines the gesture as a ”significance immanente“, a processual form of sense, which cannot be reduced to the difference between a (material, sign-like) significant and a (immaterial, conceptual) meaning, and can only be investigated through an analysis of the transforming technologies of sensibility.

In an essay from 2017 entitled When Gesture Becomes Event, Judith Butler examines Walter Benjamin’s concepts of gesture and quotation formulated in a sort of close-reading of Brecht’s theory of gestural music. With her reflection, Butler means to extend her theory of performativity by characterizing gestures
as the expressive form on the turning point between performance and language that suspends the daily communicative context. In this way, gestures create the possibility of new gnoseological paradigms.

**GESTURE: A SHORT REVIEW IN THE HISTORY OF AESTHETICS AND HUMANITIES**

The tradition of Western thought about gestures has ancient roots, beginning with Pseudo-Aristotle’s *Physiognomics* (ca. 300 BC) passing through Cicero’s *De oratore* (55 AD) and joining the book eleven of Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (90-96 AD), in which gestures are thematized in the field of the rhetoric of *actio*. Gestures are therefore objects of research for *physiognomics* and *rhetoric*, each one having a different conception: the first one focuses on states of mind and typologies of behaviour that gestures appear to express; the second one sees gestures as a support of the speech and as a non-grammatical, physical means to increase the persuasive power of speeches.

The rhetorical conception of gestures — after more or less explicit updates and revisions — brought to some formulations of the monastic rules in the Middle-Ages (cf. Schmitt 1990) as well as to the chirologies of Bulwer and Austin and the poetics of grace or of the *je ne sais quoi*. In *La scienza nuova* (1744), Giambattista Vico took distance from the physiognomic-rhetorical tradition, developing a mythical archaeology of reason, in which the gestures (“cenni”) represent a primordial form of rationality and communication, overlapping a purely somatic-ostensive relation between the human being and the world.

In *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751), Diderot focused on gestures to explain how art could generate sense without the production of meaning. Discussing the conditions of possibility of judgment about recitation, Diderot observed in the *Lettre* that artistic gestures should be considered beyond the presence, in the same work, of logical-discursive structures in order to perceive the mediality of movements in its peculiarity.

Between the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century, the reflection about gestures was included — first of all in art theory — in the project of idealisation of antiquity (Lessing, Winckelmann; cfr. Franzoni 2006) and also in the revived interest in physiognomics (from Lavater to the theorizations of the *fin de siècle*).

In the 20th century, Aby Warburg elaborated the notion of *Pathosformeln*, which arises from the study of the representations of gestural practices in the antiquity and their artistic survival. Many other attempts of theorization and artistic *mise en œuvre* of gestures on the part of writers (for example, Bertolt Brecht, Henri Michaux), visual artists (Jeff Wall), avant-gardes or other artistic movements (for instance, *tachisme* and in general *action painting*) took place in this century. In the last years the proliferation of artistic practices such as *happenings* and *flash mobs* has opened up the possibility to consider gestures as a form of dynamical aesthetic common sense, creating new forms of subjectivity.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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