Rethinking Dance Theory Through Semiotics

Šokio teorija semiotiniu požiūriu

SEMIOTICS / SEMIOTIKA

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Abstract

Advancements on dance theory have often been linked to its association with other fields of inquiry. As one of the main interests of dance theory is the discussion of dance as a language, fields that are related to the study of languages present vast options for research. In this paper, linguistics is discussed to offer an understanding of the idea of language that allows for its consideration in the dance phenomenon, which is then taken further with the systematic approach of semiotics to its structures of representation. Through Peirce's studies of how signs work, present themselves and articulate, it is possible to organise the different forms of access audiences have to the contents transmitted by dance, which, as it is demonstrated here, greatly prefer non-symbolic constructions, thus making the approach to the interpretation through the comparison to verbal languages harder and many times less fruitful then expected. Advancing dance theory through semiotics is an enterprise very little diffused at this point, but it is also one that has offered many good provocations such as the characterisation of the dance sign as an index through its corporal construction, the analysis of the multiple forms of presentation of the fundament in the dance sign and the understanding of the multiple forms of the communication of dance as a language.

Key Words:
Dance theory, semiotics, dance as a language, communication, linguistics.

Introduction

In its broadest possible sense, dance theory has been taken as any forms and accounts of this art that are presented in ways other than works of art – that is, in verbal and written form. Examples of this understanding of dance go back as far as the sixteenth century, when the first books and manuals on dance appeared. Those books, such as Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* (1589) were proposed as handbooks on how to dance properly, developing a function that is much more prescriptive than analytic, and they were for some time the only form of reflection on dance other than dancing and engaging in dance presentations.

Another form of thinking and writing about dance, dance history, has its origins as far back as 1723, when Jacques Bonnet published his *Histoire générale de la danse sacrée et profane*, and only in 1760 can a first aesthetic treatise on dance be found, in Jean-Georges Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse, et les ballets.* In this book, Noverre first proposed a reflection on the function of dance in his society, questioning its objectives, intents and the ways to better achieve them. Later on, in the early 1800s, with the full establishment of major dance companies and techniques, and the enlargement of dance audiences, dance criticism was a popular a way of evaluation, judgement and appraisal of dance works.

All of those forms of writing about dance have being continued, although not in the same proportions. Handbooks on dancing techniques are varied and countless, and criticism is still going strong at least in most major newspapers, as well as in numerous blogs and websites. Books on history have not been scarce, and it would be easy to point out (not so) few relevant dance historians in the last century. On the other hand, dance theory – in its strictest sense, as a way of analysing and discussing dance – has been cloistered to very few researches, still waiting for "investigation and explanation in the light of current theory in aesthetics, semiotics etc." (Adshead, 1988, p.187)

There are no specialised events (academic meetings, conferences, associations) on dance theory, few undergraduate and graduate programs consider it as a field of investigation, and many times, when dance is considered through theory, theory is meant as any approach presented in words. But this is not a discussion on the development of dance theory through time and this brief presentation of the field is intended as an explanation to why researches such as this one are still so dependent upon other fields of inquiry.

In this paper, dance will be discussed as a form of communication, will be referred to as language, compared to a few aspects of linguistics and semiotics theories, and reflected upon considerations on neuro-aesthetics. No immediate correspondence between any of those fields is proposed here, and certainly, none of those fields is presented to an extent that would try to exhaust the possibilities of reflection and interaction between them. What is presented here is a study on the possibility of a scientifically informed reflection on dance considered as a language, through a few references deemed useful to the extent that is both intended and possible within the limits of this paper, and all the way, the possibility or need of continuous research in each specific area should be kept in mind.

Whatever the limitations of creating theory on dance were, it has been done, and with consideration mostly to one aspect: the idea of dance as a language.

Although this reference of art as language comes initially as a metaphorical application of the concept (for a history on how the concept of language was applied to the arts, see Calabrese, 1984), this understanding puts dance, and art in general, under this concept of the communication through systems, that can be called a language, in its broader sense (for the relation between the idea of language and system see Barthes, 1984). In its narrower sense, however, a lot of discussion should be taken into account as to demonstrate that dance can actually be called a language, and therefore to point out which are the characteristics of a language, how it operates and what it is capable of – and that is the research that the field of dance theory lacks the most.

Although dance is frequently referenced to as a language, few authors venture in trying to demonstrate what consideration of the idea of language is that, and how it can be adapted to a form of art such as dance. Even when (and if) this question would be answered, and dance could be demonstrated as pertaining to this category of languages, there would still be the need to address the systematical aspect of language organisation and its presentation in the media of dance. Those investigations could be developed through different approaches, and this paper centres on two of them, linking dance to the fields of linguistics and semiotics.

The constant references to dance as a language, although metaphorical or rhetorical, have largely suggested this approximation between dance and verbal languages (simply called language in most of linguistic theory), and that is where linguistics would present itself as a first means of reflection, as being the original field devoted to the study of language. But the linguistic understanding of the idea of language is narrowed by the specificity of the object studied. For that reason, investigating within the linguistic frame – even if it offers positive assessments – requires constant excusing, justification and separation from the original propositions of this science.

Methodologically, this paper will firstly present some reflections on the idea of dance as a language from a linguistics point of view, with aid of a few references of authors and primary sources in linguistics. Surely, the field of linguistics is not taken into account in its long development through time, and the approach presented here focus precisely on one systematisation of the design features of languages, that of Charles F Hockett, published in 1960. If on the one hand it will limit this study to only one of many possible reflections, on the other hand it will demonstrate a form of comparative approach both as to how it could be beneficial to the discussion at hand and also work against it.

The problematic aspects of this comparison will lead to the consideration, still coming from a linguistics framework, on other possible approaches, such as those focusing on the functionalities of language as a system of communication. And is this possibility that forms the proposition discussed in the second section of this paper, where the structures of representation in dance are confronted with some aspects of Peirce's semiotics, here taken as a field that, in its highly abstract approach, may be applied more freely to dance (as an object of study) than linguistics could. From the semiotics approach, but still in consideration to methodological aspects of linguistic research, the third section of this paper tries

to elicit some of the features of dance as a language, not by comparing them directly to the discussed features of verbal languages, but by analysing the object at hand, dance itself, within a semiotics frame of thought organisation.

This presents a methodology developed during and for the research of a Master's Degree, that mixes literature revision in fields considered of interest and pertinent to the discussion, and reflections that come from extensive work with dance companies, dance artists, and dance performances. The idea is to create a form of reflection that is informed by relevant literature just as much as it is informed by dance itself, even though, for sake of clarity, here there aren't any examples dealing directly to specific choreographies or dance presentations. This is a form of answer to a long discussion on the particularities of doing academic research in art (see McNiff, 1998, Springgay, Irwin, Kind, 2005, and Seago, Dunne, 1999) that considers appropriate to keep the focus of the research on dance, feeding from other fields of study only insofar as they might be helpful to the understanding of that object, and not trying to apply them directly – or to replicate them – to dance.

At this point, both the question and methodology of this paper have been presented: dance theory could benefit from a development linked to the understanding of dance as a language, and that understanding can come from a semiotics-based research. Continuing on, the approach mentioned can be developed, in order to illustrate and discuss the propositions of this paper: how the linguistics consideration of a language can inform the understanding of dance as a language and how semiotics can be used to further the understanding of the systems that organise dance as a language, therefore restructuring some of the basis of dance theory and expanding them.

Linguistics and Understanding of Dance as a Language

When dance is referred to as a language, a few assumptions are made about the characteristics of what can be considered a language, as well as about what are the properties, features and capabilities of dance. The creation of analogies with the word language reflects the relevance of this field of expertise in philosophical and scientific research, mainly from the influential works of linguists such as Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Sausurre and Roman Jakobson, showing a process of popularisation of the new uses of the word that validates those terms. As a result, we can observe that the idea of language was neither readjusted nor reconsidered but expanded and as such it took under its possibilities many other meanings than originally intended (for a more detailed approximation of the idea of art as language, see Calabrese, 1984).

The thought-current that put language – the term – in this prominent position, is the one associated to the discussion of language as a systematic form of representation, and the existence of signs to organise and present that form of representation (references to multiple approaches to the concept and ideas of language and the studies of linguistics can be found in works such as Bussman, 1998, and Crystal, 1997). Linguistics then emerges as a relevant starter point to the study of this scheme that deals with how we are able to transform actual things into speech, and how this speech is organised so that the other person could go the reverse way and understand from the speech the actual things.

Linguistics has offered for a long time the basis and analysis of verbal communication features, regarding their origin, presentation and functions, in the transmission of contents. Even though there is not an easy agreement between authors of what is and what can be considered exactly a language, some of the great variability of principles taken into account was summarised by Charles F. Hockett, as the thirteen design features of communication (Hockett, 1960). What Hockett is proposing, mainly regarding a differentiation between human language and other possibilities of animal communication, is a classification of thirteen design features that are present in the systems he studied (other than Hockett's 1960 paper, see also Wacewicz & Zywiczynsk, 2014, for recent discussions on the problems of using Hockett's classification, when modern evolutionary theory and social and ecological perspectives are considered).

The thirteen features proposed by the author are: (1) auditory-vocal channel, (2) broadcast transmission and directional reception, (3) rapid fading, (4) interchangeability, (5) total feedback, (6) specialisation, (7) semanticity, (8) arbitrariness, (9) discreetness, (10) displacement, (11) productivity, (12) traditional transmission and (13) duality of patterning.

In a summarised, explaining paragraph, communication is (1 – auditory-vocal channel) emitted by the voice and received by the ear, which accounts for its (3 – rapid fading) short duration and difficult preservation in its original form; it is performed (9 – specialisation) without serving biological purposes other than that performance itself, and it is transmitted in a way that (2 – broadcast transmission and directional reception) anyone in hearing distance could listen to the emission and identify its source; every individual who uses a language is (4 – interchangeability) capable of reproducing that which they have understood, and also of (5 – total feedback) internalising all that they emit themselves, understanding their own communication, which is organised in (8 – discretion) minimal structures distinct one from the other, that are of (13 – duality of patterning) a small limited quantity, but possible of arrangement and interpolation to an infinite number of bigger communication unities, also it is possible to (11 – productivity) create new and never before heard unities; each unity is (6 – semanticity) associated to a particular meaning, that is not (8 – arbitrariness) directly related to its representation; communication permits the (10 – displacement) reference to things that are not present spatially, temporally, or even in reality; and it is (12 – traditional transmission) culturally learnt, not an innate ability.

The first approach to the matter at hand would be questioning if those thirteen features could be applied to dance (for a similar approach, but directed to music, not dance, see Fitch, 2006), but does dance have to be structured, to be formed and to function the same way as verbal language (or even as any other form of animal communication)? When Hockett makes a selection between those features pointing out which are exclusive to human language, and which can be found in other species's forms of communication, he is at the same time analysing comparative data, but also determining a separation. If a research should try to apply those design features to any form of communication other than those discussed by Hockett's data, at best, what could be reached would be a yes/ no verification. In this particular case, this verification would be: is

dance just the same as verbal language? And, if not, how different from that form of organisation is it?

If any other form of communication is analysed regarding these features, all that could be achieved is a checklist that will corroborate or impede the association of that other form to the idea of language. That could be easily done, for instance, using the first of Hockett's design features, auditory-vocal channel, that would limit the understanding of any languages to that medium. Nevertheless, should we compare a word as it is emitted and the same word as presented in writing, or in sign-language, we might find that although the medium of transmission is different, the message can still be able to fulfil its purpose.

This is relevant because it puts in perspective a different trend in linguistics. Not analysing crude data and formal or structural features, but discussing the capabilities and functional aspects of language. This modernised way of understanding what is (and what could be) a language, what it serves for, and what constitutes it, then takes language as a form of expression that is based on cognitive processes, having as its defining characteristics creativity, the ability to make conceptional abstractions, and the possibility of metalinguistic reflection (Bussmann, 1998, p.253). Thus presenting an enlarged concept of language that might not be subject to the formal limitations of Hockett's thirteen features.

Reflecting upon this enlarged understanding of language, along with the notions of functions of language (considering them mainly as described by Jakobson, 1971), the question at hand shifts a little. We are no longer inquiring if dance can be referred to as a language from its association to a set of features that are present in human verbal language, we are understanding that communication is one of the main purposes of verbal language and stating that that purpose is delivered in verbal languages through specific structures that are appropriate to its possible intents and transmissions. Verbal language ceases to be taken as the only complete possible language, and is understood as "only one among many possible languages or order of languages" (Collingwood, 1983, p.372), and the thread linking those many possible languages would be their capacity of communicating. Thus, any languages that would not allow for communication would be inoperative, but the ways by which they allow for communication might not be the same.

Similarly to this idea of language as a system of communicative purpose, we are considering an understanding of dance that suggests it has a main communicative purpose, but as its intents and transmissions are not necessarily the same as those for which verbal language is used, the structure of representation in dance is different from that of verbal language. This possibility is the focus of the next section of this paper.

As presented, some of Hockett's features are deeply linked to the structure of verbal languages. As Hockett himself discusses in his paper, not all of the features that are present in human verbal language can be found in animal forms of communication. Here, this idea is taken further, in an understanding that not all of the features present in human verbal languages will be found in other forms of language – forms that are here being called languages in the enlarged

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understanding of the term, priory presented. If Hockett's features that focus on structural elements reveal the specific ways that verbal language (or some forms of animal communication) works, they are not necessarily expansible to other kinds of language. This does not take from dance either the capacity of communication or the idea of it being a language, but strongly points out the need for specific investigation on its own formal and structural features.

And that is where linguistics fails to further the development of this study: having devoted itself to the possibilities presented by the particularities of verbal languages, linguistics may offer a set of elements and features that one could look for in the study of those languages, but that is rarely applied successfully to other systems, such as dance.

One of the difficulties involved in this process is the amplification of possibilities of understanding in artistic communications. In a dance work there is an enormous amount of elements organised to communicate, so that an audience will be overwhelmed by many waves of potentially communicative contents during a presentation. At the time of the presentation, though, there is no control over what elements of those waves will be actually taken for contents and interpreted. Once a work is at play, creators abandon part of their powers, and all that the spectators may get from the work could become – to them – a valid interpretation. That would cause a form of over-interpretation, or resemantisation (for the concept, see Ubersfeld, 1996), a process through which many elements not intended to communicate are taken as intentional, and understood as such. These elements are mixed in the audience's minds with those elements that were actually intended to communicate, and all of them would be subjected to each person's experiences and judgments.

This forms a frontier-like space, between what creators propose and what audiences perceive. But it is a blurred border, a transitional space, not a rigid line. This frontier is the space where the communication of dance language happens, by means of circuits, going into one and other territories, time and again, in an effort of the artists – both choreographers and dancers – to establish what would be needed for that work to be understood, and of the audience member to find access to those contents. These communicational paths are objectively created in modern art, and they intend to intensify contact and understanding between artists and audiences (see Navas, 2012).

This dual understanding of art, built in collaboration between artist and audiences, should not lead to the impression of an all-permitting possibility of interpretations. As much as any individual can reflect upon what is presented (and, therefore, what it represents), changing its intended meaning to something he/she can understand, as previously mentioned there is always still what is presented and offered by the work being watched. It is not freely understandable because it has its own limits: there is something that is being presented at that time, by those people, in that situation, settings, space, conditions. And those concrete things are always leading the way to interpretation.

Nevertheless, at the moment when an audience member watches a work of art, his/ her associations won't go necessarily all the way to the choreographer's

intentions as related to all the developmental stages of that work. All those elements are beyond the presentation and are carried and delivered by the presentation only indirectly. In a way, all that external collateral information is a constituent part of what is actually presented and received, but that establishes new limits of what is being presented and what is being understood, in a constant aesthetic activity (for the idea of the aesthetic attitude as an action of creation and recreation, see Goodman, 1968).

That is how dance presents a communicative purpose. Even when there is not a traditional message transmission – a story being told, and intelligence being given – there is something being communicated to someone. It is an outward directed activity (see Martin, 1978), but its possible contents may vary greatly, ranging from feelings, sensations, impressions and notions all the way to specific forms, complex ideas, facts and reflexive elements. Dance may talk about itself, it may talk about themes and things physically present in the work and it can present themes foreign to the stage, even such as other artistic languages, and those could also be representative, figurative, or indicative, referential, or even abstract.

With such ample possibilities of communication, it is important to observe that dance does not compare to other forms of language, such as verbal language, in many of its uses. Should there be the need to inform someone of something, dance hardly would be the direct and practical means to do it. When someone says *it's raining* the content of this communication is simple, direct, and, once said, informed. In this case, there is no need for repetition, as repetition would not alter the fact. However, artistically, if a choreography would deal with the idea or the theme of rain, that message would not be to inform someone of a practical thing, and it could (and probably would) be repeated many times in the work, and also would be repeated many times at every new presentation, to new audiences, or even to people watching it a second or third time. Likewise, all those repetitions could be made by the same dancers, or by different ones. All these conditions of repetition could change perceptions, the meaning and the communication in course.

Focusing on the functions of language (c.f. Jakobson, 1971), we see that most commonly dance doesn't present the referential function of directly transmitting a specific content or message. Moreover, watching a work of art does not answer to a practical need. And once it is done, even after it is understood, it is not finished, as we do not go to the theatre to be informed and "the fact that our interest in a particular play or performance is not exhausted once the actual 'intelligence given' has been acquired suggests that there are other informational levels on which theatrical messages work" (Elam, 1980, p.40). This can be pointed as a particularity and feature of artistic and dance languages, and as an indicator of how they represent and communicate to audiences.

Thinking in terms of Peircean semiotics, the idea of representation is that there is something in the place of another thing (see Peirce, 1994). A receiver is in contact with the representative and through it they get the idea of what is being represented. In verbal languages words are representatives: the word *Tree* represents the actual idea of a tree, or a specific tree in question. In dance,

choreography represents something, but there is little certainty about what that something could be. Repetition may be a strategy to get to that content, to what is being represented, to the ideas of the choreographer and his propositions, not in matters of movement – as the movement is the representative – but concerning what that specific collection of movements, in that work, in that presentation, as done by that group of dancers, is representing.

All other forms of getting to understand a work, such as reading the program and interviews with artists, just as well as the previous knowledge someone may have, may change the interpretations they make of what is presented. But they cannot actually change either the representatives – what is being presented – or the represented – that intended meaning. They can alter forms of access to a work, but not really change the representations. Surely, the form of access is greatly relevant to the communication, but so is the representation and the contents being represented.

This form of representation is an example of the sign, as Peirce (1994) described many times: in a great simplification, as a unity that represents something to someone. At this point, more than a suggestion or a stratagem, semiotics presents itself as a methodological imperative. Surely this does not suggest the possibility (or productivity) of trying to adapt semiotics theory as a whole to dance phenomena. What it implies is that there is a connection between the forms of representation in the presentation of a dance, and the possibilities of the study of that representation through a semiotics frame.

The research proposed should start from the very origins of semiotics, and Peirce's categories to lead to the forms of representation in the dance sign (when its fundament is discussed), as well as its structure of representation, divergent from the symbolic logic of words, that could be categorised into its own modes of representation, which would direct the study of the experience of understanding those signs both towards what originates them (their objects) and towards the understandings they create (their interpretants – in their many levels).

This approach suggests the organisational singularities of dance as a language, therefore indicating features that are centred around the communicative function of – languages and of – dance, and encompassing the particular structural and formal features of this language in discussion. The determination and study of those features are the main purposes of using semiotics to the development of dance theory, and therefore are the main focus of the next and final part of this paper, that aims to present a few of those features in relation to some of their semiotics references and their presentation in dance communication.

Features of Dance as a Language

Audiences go to the theatre, they watch a dance work, they are interested and they want to understand it, but, as mentioned, what is being transmitted is of a different order (or function) of a direct message, and at the same time, the work itself is the means to get to the matter of what is being represented, as well as what makes it obscure. It is a characteristic of the poetic function of language (c.f. Jakobson, 1971) that the focus is not on the transmission of a direct meaning but elsewhere, in the actual code of that transmission. This is a clear feature of dance as a language as well, that, presented with semiotics terms, shows that

the emphasis in the dance sign is often more directed to its fundament rather than to its object.

When dancers are presenting a choreography, they establish a connection between their audience and the choreographer of the work, through the dance. This topic of interaction between artists and viewers through language brings on another feature of the communication through dance as a language, that is the association of both the emissary and the receiver of a message in the construction of a code: when presented with a work of art and trying to interpret it, the receiver does not know the rules tangled in the creation of the meanings of that work, and they will try to get to those meanings by using other references and experiences they might have (what is called by Peirce, 1994, collateral information) as well as particular perceptions derived from the work in question. When creating, the choreographer translates experience from one system of signs to another (see Scott, 1983), passing information previously available in other possible sources (ranging from another work that would serve as inspiration for the choreography he/ she is creating to possible thoughts and opinions only in his/ her own mind) to another means: the movement and the body of the dancers. Next, the dancers of that work will present this contents, as assimilated by them, to the audience, who will then have their own chance to assimilate them. This is part of how dance as a language deals with a mutually shared code.

The code is the structure that allows for the transcription of a message from one form of presentation to another (elements of a communicative system c.f. Jakobson, 1971). The idea might be in the choreographer's mind, and then it must be transcribed into movement, so that the dancer can execute it, next it must be transcribed another time, now in the head of the person watching it, so that the idea is understood. The code is a form of correlation between emissary and receiver, and is what allows for the understanding of the message. It is a group of representative and organised elements commonly known by the users of this code. In verbal languages, each language (English, Portuguese, French) is a code, with its own sets of rules. But in dance such an organisation is hard to find.

There is, to a certain level, a common code, at least semi-shared between artists and audiences, minimally because those individuals can't exempt themselves from their own cultures. That is how "theatre establishes its network of codified sign-systems by virtues of the cultural codes which govern behaviour, speech, dress, make-up, etc., in society at large" (Aston, Savona**,** 1991, p.111). As audiences continually attempt to understand dance works, trying to make new perceptions and assumptions, establishing new relations, a code is being formed, mutually by those that create and present the works of art and those that watch them.

This process of association between those involved in the communication of dance as a language is a strong feature of that language, which reaffirms the unity of the triad sign-object-interpretant (for more insight on how the triadic aspect of semiosis is present in artistic communication see Kolarova, 2010), which is a fundamental part of the study in a semiotics frame. All of these characteristics can be pointed out by paying attention to elements of thirdness in dance. This taste for thirdness, as referred to by Lefebvre (2007) is representative of

the highly sign-based characteristic of the performing arts that is not different in dance, and should not be taken lightly.

As previously pointed out, performance and execution are directly related to production and understanding of contents in dance. The choreographer is linked to the dancers, who are linked to the people watching them, who then can try to understand the work. The receiver is fundamental: Dance cannot be studied (or presented) as language without consideration to the necessity of audiences, of presenting the work of art. All discussions on potential meaning intrinsic to a choreography would be mere speculations, as only while being presented in front of an audience there is complete communication through dance (see Martin, 1978, for the relevance of presentation to the completeness of dance phenomena).

Rehearsals, on this matter, can be seen as a form of verifying the possibilities of communication of a work. While repeating what was created, artists can do a verification: whether or not the scenic structures intended to bear meanings and contents for the communication are present, asserted, well developed, well executed, and so on.

From a different perspective, it is not enough, though, to guarantee the parts of the communication. Having emissary and receiver is not an assurance of communication. Even further, it is not an assurance of the interpretation intended. Dance understanding is based not only on the elaboration of the message, but also on the interest of the audience to understand what is being presented and its presentation by the dancers. This presentation is totally dependent upon the body of the dancer, who is not a random communicator, but a specialist, prepared for this specific kind of transmissions.

In dance the channel of communication – the means of its transmission – is the body of the dancer, but the dancer and their body are not clear, transparent interfaces between emissary and receiver. They are in a position of being both subject to interference (or noise, as the term usually goes for communication systems), as any other channel is; and creators of interference, as the transmission of the message will depend upon the abilities, capacities and the performance of the dancer, remade at each new presentation – each new communication of that content. Two different dancers can transmit the same message (i.e., the same choreography) with interferences so distinct that the message may be understood differently by the receiver.

This is not a shortcoming of the dancer – although historically much was done to try to make dancers into blank canvases – but an intimate feature of dance as a language. The body of the dancer is a body-territory (a concept proposed by Brazilian researcher Cássia Navas), a body that presents itself both as a means of work, a tool, and as the form of existence of the dancer, and even though in dance discourses there have been separations between these functions (see, among many other possibilities, Bernard, 1972), such theoretical and study-oriented separation is not present in practical life, as all bodily functions form an inseparable unity in the reality of the dancer. Each dancer has a particular, individual and unique body, genetically, but also in matters of training, influences, capacities, preferences, strength, and, correspondingly, the same

goes to accidents, limitations and difficulties. Each dancer is a channel, different from another dancer, because the forms of noise intimately rooted in their bodies are of a unique combination.

If noise can be traditionally understood as interference, as distortion, as something to be avoided, in dance it is programmatic and it must be taken into account since the first moments of creation of a dance work and all the way through its presentations. If the choreographer is not a solo performer, if he/ she must create for other bodies, then he/ she will have to remember that those are the bodies that will transmit his/ her messages/ intentions/ communications. The choreographer will have to work with the actual interferences the bodies produce to make sure that the message intended is being transmitted. As long as we're considering forms of dance that can only be done by bodies, there is no other possibility: communicating dance means dealing with individual, particular, singular bodies, bodies-territories and their capacities to adapt and present contents; and only their presentation of those contents will be taken into account by the audience when a dance work is watched. That shows that the dance sign is a creation shared by both choreographic intentions and dancers' performances.

In art, where so much focus is put on how something is said – again, the poetic function of language – noise, as something that can alter the reception of the message, is also part of the focus of communication. That is the reason why so much choreography is adjusted from one performer to another: as they present things differently, to get to the same signification, to the same communication, sometimes alterations in the originally intended message are needed.

This leads back to the question of representation. Semiotically, as mentioned, there is the unit that carries the representation (the sign, or fundament of the sign), and there is that which this fundament stands for, the object of the sign. In dance, what is the thing that represents? What is the fundament of the dance sign? Choreography, among many other elements, is distinctively relevant to that structure of representation, although it will be constantly surrounded by other languages, such as lighting, décor, and even the stage and architecture. Nevertheless, it is choreography that distinguishes dance apart from other scenic languages. So, what are the unities of this dance/ choreographic representation? It represents as a whole, just like a text would. At the same time, a text has words, phrases, paragraphs, which refer to the minimal unities possible and their articulation in bigger groups and clusters.

What, in dance, is the barer of meanings and contents? In trying to break a code, or translate an ancient language, with no living speakers to tell the meaning of the text, one common procedure would be searching for patterns of repetition, as to find out unities of meaning hidden in the text. Just the same, if one tries to break down and divide a choreography, one will find dance steps, and some combinations of those steps that can have – or at least indicate – meanings. Those combinations, commonly called choreographic phrases, are capable of more developed meanings (for the relevance of choreographic phrases, see the work of American choreographer Doris Humphrey, 1959).

If a step can be suggestive, give impressions and qualities, a phrase can be factual, represent an action, a subject, and articulate contents. It is from the choreographic phrases that audiences can understand more levels of meaning. At the same time, some single steps could be enough, which leads to an understanding of a multiple structure of representation: we cannot and should not limit the possibilities of the understanding to one single form of presentation of the fundament, as dance may transmit one content in a step, another in a phrase, a third one from a collection of phrases, and a fourth content only by the choreography as a whole.

That sums the form of the representation, but leads to a question about the nature of that representation: what is the association between what is being presented and what it represents that allows the audience to understand from the showing of one, the content which is the other? In semiotic terms: how is it that the fundament of the dance sign represents its object?

Analysing the representation of words in a verbal language, we see that words relate to their meanings by an arbitrary rule: a decision that each word represents a specific meaning. This points out the symbolic nature of representation in verbal languages. Another possibility, the representation through similarity, the iconic form, has long been discussed as a main structure in the representation of the Arts, suggested from the perception of qualities in works of art (see Sørensen, 2009). But in dance, although sometimes there is a relation of identity between one movement and the thing it represents, should we consider this the basis of choreographic representation, dance would only be capable of discussing other movements, and that is not the case. Even if there might be possible visual associations, that is not the main nature of dance representation. Neither is the arbitrariness, as only in mime and some forms of stylised classical ballet there ever were associations created as a set of rules.

In dance the thing that represents is the body, and all it can do. Choreographers' bodies propose messages, dancers' bodies learn and perform those messages, audiences members' bodies watch those bodies and understand, through their performance, the messages intended. Against the many discussions on the ephemerality of dance and its high level of abstraction, the body remains as concreteness, as the place and means of performance and the channel for communication. Onstage, dancing, the body is representative of those watching it – not for being visually similar (or more or less different) to the bodies of those in the audience – but in a relation of existence: the body is how people are presented and how they experiment and live. Be it onstage or in the audience, the body – as a category – is the common denominator. Artists' and viewers' bodies are associated by this larger category, to which they all pertain as unities, instances.

This causal connection between bodies is one of the subjects of the field of neuroaesthetics (see Cross, Ticini, 2011, Cinzia, Vitorino, 2009, Calvo-Merino et al., 2008). In a broader sense, the theory presented revolves around the mirror-neuron system found in researches with primates other than humans (see Rizzolatti, Craighero, 2004). This system presents neural structures that are activated in some areas of the brain both when an individual performs an action

and when the individual sees the action being performed by others. The application to neuroaesthetics focus on the possibility of finding similar structures on human subjects, and has suggested the participation of the neural motor system in dance appreciation (Calvo-Merino et al., 2008), establishing a neural relation between moving and watching movement, that can account, physiologically, for the structure of representation of the dance sign.

This relation of representation related by the existence is identified in semiotics as the Index. Dance, being bodily, representing through the association of one body to another, is therefore, a phenomenon of indexical representation. The dancing body dances for the audience – for them to watch –, and for the audience – dancing instead of them, in their place, as the movement, both done and observed, can activate the brain centers for emotional and reward-related responses (Cinzia, Vitorino, 2009), establishing connexions between bodies. Surely, each body is different in its individuality and particularities, and would perform differently, but as the studies of mirror-neurons and neuroaesthetics show, along with the idea of the body-territories, it is the association between choreographers and dancers, and then dancers and audiences that determine the possibility of the representation of dance as a language, through indexical structures.

Conclusions

Dance theory is a field mainly concerned with aspects of dance as a language. The language of dance is completely unfolded only at the time of its presentation, when all the necessary relations to a work of art can be established for the actual transmission of its contents. While unfolding, dance, as a language, articulates discrete logical, formal, structural, functional and sensible elements that determine the possibilities and communicational effectiveness of this language. Having found the similarities to verbal language as far as functional features of communication go, this paper proceeded in investigating which other features could be pointed out as particularities of dance language.

Communication and language are not being understood as the exact same thing here. Although there are ample sources of researches on both subjects, the apparent equivalency that is presented within this paper only goes as far as the notion that the possibility of communicating is a main function of languages. Another main characteristic of language, one that can distinguish it from other forms of communication not presented as language, would be its systematic organisation. Then, to discuss dance as a language, one could look into its possibility of communication, and its organisation in a system. Dance is a form of expression of knowledge intentionally organised through movement (for more on dance as knowledge, and not as symptom of the dancer or choreographer, see Langer, 1980), this is what validates its understanding here as a systematic form of communication, and therefore as a language.

When Hockett's features were initially presented, a first division was made between them as to separate those that could be perceived as general to multiple forms of languages, and those that are particular to each form. Then, the main purpose of this paper was developed, when the features that could be perceived as particular to dance as a language were discussed in a semiotics frame of organisation.

In trying to advance possible further approaches to the same topic, the discussed features should be namely presented, and we would find them as (A) Noise as Message, (B) Body-Territory, (C) Dual Understanding, (D) Non-Exhaustiveness, (E) Over-Interpretation/ Resemantisation, (F) Indexical Representation, (G) Functional Repetition, (H) Mutual Code Construction, and (I) Multiple Structure of the Fundament.

Just as Hockett's thirteen features were summarised in one paragraph as to elicit how they are presented and how they organise the communication they study, the same process is adopted here in relation to the features of dance as a language that have been pointed out: the communication of dance as a language is a form of (F) Indexical Representation, that works because the bodies of the people in the audience relate directly to the (B) Body-Territories of the dancers, which are specialists in the transmission of dance communication, but that affect those transmissions by their individualities, interfering in them and associating (A) Noise as a fundamental part of the Message they convey; the message transmitted can be articulated in many unities as either a step, a choreographic phrase (however long it might be) or the whole performance can be taken as the representative, in a (I) Multiple Structure of The Fundament, each structure allowing (G) Functional Repetition, as their possibilities of meanings are (D) Not Exhausted by one single presentation, and they work in a (C) Dual Understanding, as the viewer will try to understand that which is presented in an effort between the many possibilities of his background, collateral information, and the limitations of what the work actually presents; those efforts, both from the viewer in the interpretation and from the artists in the making of the communication, account for a (H) Mutual Code Construction that feeds from both parts, but is often extrapolated on by the possibilities of (E) Over-Interpretation/ Resemantisation, when the viewer takes as communicative something not originally intended to communicate.

If Hockett's list of thirteen features of communication was reproduced here, it is known that those thirteen represent many others that were indicated, speculated, elaborated upon, debated and reconsidered throughout history. At this stage of the research on dance theory and dance as a language, when each new proposition begins with long justifications, such as those presented in the first sections of this paper, no item should be automatically excluded of a list, just as much as no item should be listed merely for the sake of listing. The aim here was to investigate upon dance as language and to find its characteristics that were able to be pointed out, presented, explained and verified. This process results in a small list of features that can serve as a starter point for the study of this language and its structures that allow for communication. Many other features could and should be indicated, just as much as these should be questioned and rethought. Only through laborious and devoted work, as well as great interest by researchers, the field of dance theory could reach its aim of presenting the structures of Dance as a language to a satisfactory level.

In this paper, semiotics was presented as a possible way to the development of that study. Even if it is not the only way, it presents itself as an organised systematic approach that is prepared to deal with the non-symbolic structure

of representation engaged in this form of language, as well as with many of its other features (Rochelle, 2014). While it does not exhaust the study of dance as a language, semiotics offers an approach that is capable of broadening the current stands on that subject, therefore reorganising propositions and rethinking dance theory.

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Santrauka

Henrique Rochelle. Šokio teorija semiotiniu požiūriu

Naujausieji šokio teorijos tyrimų rezultatai dažnu atveju siejami su jos panašumu į kitas mokslinių tyrinėjimų sritis. Kaip vienas iš pagrindinių šios teorijos objektų yra diskusija apie šokį kaip kalbą, siejamą su kalbos tyrimais, teikiančiais daug galimybių. Šiame straipsnyje lingvistika yra pasitelkiama kaip būdas suprasti kalbos idėją, į kurią atsižvelgiama nagrinėjant šokį kaip reiškinį ir kuris vėliau savo ruožtu nagrinėjamas sisteminiu semiotikos požiūriu į jo vaizdavimo struktūrą. Naudojant Peirce'o tyrimą apie tai, kaip veikia ženklai, kaip jie save pateikia ir artikuliuoja, galima suformuluoti įvairius požiūrius į šokio turinį, kurie, kaip čia parodysime, ryškiai teikia pirmenybę nesimbolinėms konstrukcijoms, tokiu būdu sukurdami sunkesnes ir daug mažiau nei tikėtasi vaisingas galimybes interpretacijai per palyginimą su verbalinėmis kalbomis. Šokio teorija pasitelkiant semiotiką yra labai menkai išplėtota, tačiau tai yra teorija, kuri suteikia daug galimybių diskusijai apie šokio ženklus, apie šokio formų pateikimo pagrindus ir supratimą apie šokio kaip kalbos komunikavimo formas.

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Research interests

Dance, dance theory, dance as a language, dance history, communication, semiotics.

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