

Gesture and Agency, Dancing as Gesturing

Sam Gill

Carrie Noland's 2009 book *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* is a marvelous introduction to the richness of gesture and the study of gesture. Noland opens gesture to studies that have, I think, amazingly fruitful and provocative potential especially for the study of dancing. This is obvious from her opening consideration of observing a graffiti writer. First, we perhaps wouldn't even think of the sweeping fluid movements of the graffiti writer as gesturing, yet we can clearly recognize that there are techniques born in the muscles and brain that distinguish this action. Once we have adjusted to allow this movement as gesture let's hear what Noland has to say,

In the magnified scope of the graffiti gesture, writing affords the writer an opportunity to impress the individual shape and vitality of the body's motor power onto the contours of the cultural sign. Yet if the writer performs the motion repeatedly, his own body will eventually be inscribed, the muscles and ligaments physiologically altered, by the gestural routine that expresses and confines his body at the very same time.¹

Noland shifts our attention away from the message communicated by gesturing to the very act of creating the message. Those actions are more instrumental and, with respect to the end product, incidental. Yet, Noland still holds that the gesturing affords the writer a way of impressing his own body's movement onto a cultural sign ... the resulting tag. The gesture mediates the body of the writer and the tag produced and this is something other than intentionally communicating a message by producing a visible action.

Noland goes on to turn the gesturing back onto the body of the graffiti writer. Through his high repetition of these gestural routines, that is, the actions of physically writing, the writer's body becomes physiologically—that is, muscles and ligaments—altered. Thus the repetition of the gesturing patterns of graffiti writing remake the body of the writer into a graffiti writer. Thus, gesturing, she shows goes both ways as the expression of body and in confining and remaking the body. Well, in the first paragraph of her book, read carefully, we grasp that the study of gesture is a daunting, provocative, and altogether amazingly interesting topic.

Noland might just as well have been observing a dancer as an exemplar of gesturing. Dancers of any particular dance form are trained in patterns of movement that are recognized as distinguishing the particular dance genre or form. It might be anything from the designated frame and walking conventions that designate tango to the contractions of Martha Graham's dances to the upright posture and en pointe of ballet. What we attend to in identifying specific dances are the gestural patterns of the

¹ Carrie Noland's 2009 book *Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, p. 1.

dance. And, like the graffiti writer, the continual repetition of these gestural/postural performances does remake the body of the dancer.

However, unlike the graffiti writer who leaves a tag or a piece, the dancer's gesturing is the object of the dancing. Thus in the gesturing of dancing trace or mark is collapsed into or folded back into the act of gesturing itself. We can appreciate, if we, like Noland, have the opportunity to watch a graffiti writer, that the sweeping gesturing of graffiti writing may, in themselves, be something rather like dancing. Dancing is delightfully and distinctly delicate in this way. Much more will be said of this as we continue.

In this provocative sense gesturing will be understood in the most interesting terms. For example, gesture is not a onetime movement, but rather an iteration of a movement pattern established through high repetition. In this sense gesture is something like skill in one context and habit in another. Repetition creates sensorimotor patterns that produce gestures, most usually unconsciously. Without the repetition the movement would not qualify as gesture, nor would it have a field in which to be active. Yet, while gesture emerges from repetition and is performed as in some sense automatic sensorimotor programs, it is also necessarily improvisational, or as Noland, a dancer herself, calls it "an improvisational dance." Here we learn something essential about improvisation. Improvisation cannot occur as a unique movement, that is, as a movement without context or expectation against which to grasp it. Improvisation depends on gesture, that is, on established movement patterns that are rule governed and in important ways totally predictable.

I have a North Indian friend who is a master tabla drum player. I once paired him with a Senegalese kora player for a concert and to make a CD. I know that tabla drumming is based on highly defined complex rhythm patterns. In playing with the kora I could see the extent to which he was improving to "play with" the kora. I asked him how that worked and he told me that once you become a tabla master the rhythms are there to provide a context and framework in which to make new patterns and rhythms without the traditional ones being violated. I've heard the same from flamenco guitarist friends. You can also see this in Latin American music where all the rhythm players are playing around the specific beat that distinguishes the rhythm of the music being played, but no one is actually playing the rhythm itself.

Gesture is like this. One would think that repetition to the extent of the movement becoming automatic would simply wring from it all possible creativity, yet the exact opposite is the case. This is an essential perspective we need to appreciate dancing which is necessarily highly repetitious, yet always creative and new.

Noland explicitly states her thesis this way: "that kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovation in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained."² Gesturing always seems to pull both directions: routinization and improvisation, expression of self or culture and the impression-creating self and enculturation. It will be important to appreciate that we gain

² Ibid., pp. 2-3

knowledge through acquired gestural routines, our dances, not just express ourselves by means of these gestures, these dances.

From here we may begin to appreciate how dancing can be and often is a powerful means by which society, normative culture, religious principles are tested and changed. Gestures are clearly reiterated learned behaviors or as Noland says, gesturing is “a submission of the shared human anatomy to a set of bodily practices specific to one culture.”³ Yet, precisely because of this submissive aspect of cultural systems of gesturing, gesturing is a fundamental means by which these cultural values are tested and changed. Noland notes that “gesturing also affords an opportunity for interoceptive or kinesthetic awareness, the intensity of which may cause subjects to alter the very way they move.” Thus, “kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice.”⁴ With this amazing understanding, we may begin to appreciate on a deeper level why it is dancing, seemingly this unimportant powerless pastime activity, is almost invariably found at the heart of major cultural change. Earlier we looked at the role the film “Footloose” played in changing the cultural attitudes toward body and sexuality so strongly enforced by Christianity and clearly the impact on the change in American Christianity are still being played out. This was the hip shaking sexually charged era of Elvis and these rising gestural patterns engendered, in many respects, the sexual revolution of the last half of the twentieth century.

From this perspective we can appreciate the common trajectory of the development of dance forms. They often begin as street dances, unacceptable and considered offensive. We need think only of tango, capoeira, swing, breakin’, modern dance, contact improvisation, and certainly rock n roll to get an idea. Yet, with time these dances “catch on” in that the gesturing patterns of the dances are almost invariably taken up by larger populations and, in time, insinuate themselves into the muscles and ligaments and neurology of the members of the society. Society members literally start walking and running and comporting themselves with different bodies remade through these gestural patterns. And, in time, these dances are appropriated by structurally stable members of society and they become studio dances and formally codified to be judged in dance competitions. The important point for us to understand here is that gesturing offers both the means by which culture insinuates itself on the bodies of its members, but also the means by which members of the culture can, through altering gestural practices, effect change on culture, society, and religion.

As we expand our appreciation of dancing in terms of gesturing, we will build on this idea that gesturing involves the body in a “double process of active displacement (through contraction of muscles) and information gathering (through the neuro-receptors located along the muscles).”⁵

I need to clarify my approach here in part. I presented a rather expansive section on “movement.” The issue here is “how does gesture differ from movement?” Noland actually proposed the replacement of

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

the term “movement” with the term “gesture” because she believes that gesture “encourages us to view all movements executed by the human body as situated along a continuum—from ordinary iteration of a habit to the most spectacular and self-conscious performance of choreography.”⁶ I understand the importance of this perspective, yet I think that there remains some value in seeing gesturing as a subset of movement. Certainly there are a great many studies that focus on movement, as we have examined, that provide us with important openings to much greater appreciation and comprehension of ourselves as moving, especially self-moving, beings. Gesturing to me becomes increasingly important as we begin to focus on those specific types and examples of routinized sequences of movement such as dancing and dances. I also think that to approach all movement only on the terms of gesturing is more difficult than to ease through movement into gesturing. I don’t contest Noland in any significant way; it is more a matter of personal style and choice.

Noland, as others, seems to me to understand gesture as applicable to every human movement. I’m not clear that I am ready to go that far, but the very idea opens our understanding of gesture well beyond a visible act of utterance. Broadening this we should consider that gesture has an agentive role to play. The poor view limits that agency to the act of communication or cognition, yet even parallel to the speech act theory we would immediately expand that to having a performative function, as doing something in communicating something. Standing beside the road with one’s thumb raised communicated the information “I need a ride,” but it also performs the act of “getting that ride,” that is, the agency performed by “thumbing a ride” is much more important and significant than is communicating a message or a bit of information.

So to sum up here, rich gesture is, as I am proposing it, to be understood as having much deeper agentive force. Our gestures create space. Our gestures correspond with affordances and thus with our makings. Our gestures enculturate. Our gestures actually remake the body of the one gesturing at the level of tissue. Our body movement, our postural attitudes, our actions; they all correspond with our gestural practices. We are, in the literal sense of evident at the level of tissue, our gestures. Gestures are affective as well. They shape and determine our own feelings as well as those of others that experience our gestures. So the rich view of gesture sees it as having an enormous range of agentive powers that serve to create and shape ourselves and our environments. I see this agentive aspect of gesture as efferent, as an arc that extends the body into the environment as well as into one’s very flesh.

This reaching out, this extension, this expression, this agency is complemented by a corresponding arc of gesture that typically goes unidentified, not discussed. There were hints of this in the discussion of agency above, in that agency is also always a reaching out to impact the environment with the expectation that it will return to also change the self. Gesture is always a reaching out to touch, to explore, to grope, to investigate, to explore. In this sense its function, its agency, is heuristic and affective. This is I think an afferent arc of gesture; a movement from the environment to the one gesturing. In gesture we discover ourselves and our environment; we explore possible meanings as we physically and mentally grope the world with our gestures

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.