

Gesture as Visible Action

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Bharata natyam, a South Indian Hindu form of dance that dates from antiquity, is often invoked when dancing is considered in terms of gesturing. A distinctive feature of bharata natyam is the extensive use of mudras (or hastas) or hand gestures/positions throughout the dance, particularly in the aspect known as abhinaya that focuses on the dance corresponding with stories from classical Indian literature, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. There are 32 single-hand mudras which are carefully taught on their own as essential to bharata natyam training.

The abhinaya aspect of bharata natyam is often referred to as the “storytelling” aspect of the dance with an understanding that the dancer, through posture and gesture tells the classic stories. While I don’t actually agree with this understanding of the dance, let’s persist a bit to allow ourselves to understand that this view correlates with one of the persistent understandings of gesturing. Adam Kendon in his 2004 book *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* articulates gesturing, in this understanding, as *visible actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness*. Such visible actions often substitute for language and often occur where language would not suffice. For example, if I am standing roadside wanting a ride from passing motorists, it is not effective to yell at them as they pass, “Hey, buddy, how about a ride?” Rather I use the visible action commonly understood in our culture of extending my arm, making a fist with my thumb fully extended, and rotate my forearm back and forth in the plain parallel to the road with my thumb pointing in the direction I wish to travel or simply I “thumb a ride.” The visible actions clearly have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness. I don’t do these actions accidentally. This understanding pairs gesture with expressed meaning and sees gesture as primarily an act of communication. Studies of such gestures from era to era and culture to culture have occurred since antiquity. The common result of these studies is often the production of a chart illustrating the gesture along with what it means.

Now from the perspective of this view of gesture, we would approach bharata natyam asking what these mudras mean as manifest deliberate visible actions. By means of a chart we may identify them by name. So bharata natyam has a fixed number of one- and two-hand hastas each with a name.

The value of each mudra becomes specific only in the context of gestural patterns in which the body is in movement including holding the mudra position of the hands while moving the arms and body in conjunction with facial expressions and in the context of the story which is being sung by the accompanying singer. Thus any single mudra has the potential for a very wide association with meaning elements. The question is, do the mudras tell the story as would be expected of the sequence of words might in an utterance? The question is rather clearly that they do not bear meaning in this lexical sense. Mudra-based gesturing often becomes stylized illustration of the physical actions of the characters in the stories, for example, birds flying, the shooting of an arrow, a horned bull, shyness, giving a gift, bees on a flower, and so on. Or they may have no literal connection with the characters in the story at all. Clearly it is the dancing itself, the sequence of movements in the context of music that allows the mudra to take on any delimiting of reference or value or meaning rather than the other way round. One

cannot simply look at a mudra, as one would a word in a dictionary, and indicate the possible meanings it might convey. This is backwards to the way it works.

Returning to my objection of understanding the abhinaya aspect of bharata natyam as storytelling, it is important for us to understand that bharata natyam gesturing is not adequately understood if we narrowly limit our understanding of gesturing to visible actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness. Bharata natyam gesturing is much richer than this view would allow. Furthermore, it is important that we reject this limited understanding of gesturing as adequate for the appreciation of any dancing. We have to seek a richer understanding of gesturing to help us appreciate dancing more fully by considering it as gesturing.

To consider dancing in terms of this “poor” understanding of gesture is to limit it to being a language or an act of expression or communication. I offered a discussion of the limitations of these understandings of dancing in an earlier lecture.

We need a “rich” understanding of gesturing.