

ARTICLE

Phenomenology of Gesture Between Heidegger and Flusser

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss two approaches to the phenomenon of gesture, constituted by the existential dimension of embodiment, intersubjectivity, affectivity, and language: while Martin Heidegger states that human bodily movement as a whole should be understood as gesture in contrast to the spatial movement of things, Vilém Flusser integrates under this notion a multitude of human practices and activities that common sense hesitates to call gestures. The dilemma of the phenomenology of gesture consists in this tension between the plural concreteness of gestural appearances and the irrepressible temptation to identify a unitary layer that would allow them to hold together.

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'analyse deux approches du phénomène du geste, tel qu'il est constitué par l'incarnation, l'intersubjectivité, l'affectivité et le langage : tandis que Martin Heidegger affirme que le mouvement corporel humain dans son ensemble doit être compris comme geste par opposition au mouvement spatial des choses, Vilém Flusser intègre sous cette notion une multitude de pratiques et d'activités humaines que le sens commun hésite à appeler gestes. Le dilemme de la phénoménologie du geste consiste dans cette tension entre la concrétude plurielle des apparences gestuelles et la tentation irrépressible d'identifier une couche unitaire qui leur permettrait de tenir ensemble.

Keywords: gesture; body; expression; affectivity; Heidegger; Flusser

The essence of what your language calls “gesture” is hard to say (*Das Eigentliche dessen, was in Ihrer Sprache “Gebärde” heißt, läßt sich schwer sagen*).

(Heidegger, 1982, p. 18, 1985, p. 102)

1. Introduction

My aim in this article is to develop a phenomenological reflection on the question of gesture. However, gesture is not an easy task for a phenomenological approach, and this is perhaps the reason that this topic has only been rarely tackled by phenomenologists, and most often not in a straightforward way, but rather in a tangential

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and hasty manner. In the first section of this article, I will start by highlighting the difficulties encountered by any attempt to describe gesture in an applied phenomenological way, emphasizing that the irreducible plurality of gestures is constituted in various ways at the intertwining of several existential dimension, such as embodiment, intersubjectivity, affectivity, and language. Then, in the second section, I will place the phenomenon of gesture in relation to bodily movement and to the phenomenon of expressivity, differentiating gestures from non-gestural movements and non-gestural expressions. In the last two sections of the article, I will focus on two distinct approaches to the problem of gesture, both inspired by the phenomenological style of thought, and both operating with a paradoxical extension of the concept of gesture. On the one hand, in the *Zollikon Seminars* Martin Heidegger denies that the idea of expressivity is pertinent for determining the phenomenon of gesture. Instead, he states that human bodily movement as a whole should be understood as gesture, in contrast to the spatial movement of things. Heidegger also extends the term 'gesture' to non-bodily phenomena, reflecting, for example, the post-metaphysical understanding of the relation between thing and world. On the other hand, Vilém Flusser places first the phenomenon of gesture in relation to the difference between moods (*Stimmungen*) and affect (*Gestimmtheit*), understanding it as a symbolic movement for which we cannot find a satisfactory causal explanation. Flusser subsequently attempts to build 'a general theory of gesture' and proposes several classifications of gestures, according to their embodied character and their directionality, finally integrating under this notion a plurality of human practices and activities.

2. Gesture as a Phenomenological Dilemma

Understanding gesture philosophically — and especially phenomenologically — is a more difficult undertaking than it seems at first glance, and this despite the abundance of recent interdisciplinary research in the field of gesture studies (Calbris, 2011; Cienki & Müller, 2008; Duncan, Cassell, & Levy, 2007; Kendon, 1996, 2004, 2013; McNeill, 2000; Streeck, 2009). If we ask ourselves what 'gesture' is in its essence (what makes a gesture be a gesture and nothing else), or how 'gestures' show themselves and what functions they have in our existential sphere, we encounter the main difficulty, i.e., that the very term 'gesture' covers a disturbing diversity of situations, seemingly irreducible to a common core. This circumstance is further complicated by the fact that, in addition to the use of the term to designate 'actual gestures,' we often encounter a rather figurative use of the notion of gesture (taken as a vague synonym for operation, action, practice, or act). But even if we put these figurative meanings in parentheses and take them out of the discussion, the formal versatility of gestures themselves and the luxuriant multiplicity of their modes of appearance constitute a universe in itself. For we can perceive simple gestures or gestures as complex and stratified as possible, just as we encounter spontaneously intelligible gestures or gestures that require decoding through a more laborious hermeneutics. There are gestures with a standardized meaning, unanimously recognizable, but there are also particularized gestures, either in the sense that they are intelligible only within a clearly circumscribed community, or that they are specific to the individual person in the singularity of that person's own gestural sphere. And, if we can easily recognize an

approving (positive) gesture or a disapproving (negative) gesture, we also encounter equivocal and ambiguous gestures, the meaning of which is rather diffuse. There are direct gestures, which bring an obvious meaning into play, just as there are also indirect gestures, which engage a mediated meaning, one that is not apparent or cannot be caught at first, and among the latter we can place the so-called symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, or hyperbolic gestures. We have gestures that consistently accompany speech, just as we have gestures that operate independently of spoken speech. Many gestures have a definite meaning-content, expressing a certain 'something' articulated by the structure of an 'of': gestures of helplessness, hatred, or exasperation; gestures of threat or of anger, pain, or suffering; gestures of protest, refusal, or disgust; gestures of joy, friendship, tenderness, or recognition; gestures of courtesy, kindness, or politeness; gestures of doubt, bewilderment, or perplexity, etc. But there are also simple indicative gestures, with circumstantial meaning ('here,' 'look there,' 'come,' etc.) or occasional meaning ('this,' 'that,' etc.; see Ferencz-Flatz, 2021), as well as gestures that do not offer in the first instance anything precise to be understood, while nevertheless being fully significant in their pure gestures (such as the gesture in dance). Then we can contrast evasive, hesitant, or flabby gestures with firm, determined, or energetic ones, or graceful, fine, elegant, or subtle gestures with boorish, rude, or cumbersome ones. We can distinguish between discreet and indiscreet gestures, between calm or measured gestures and agitated or precipitous gestures, between orderly or rhythmic gestures and chaotic and unpredictable gestures, between restrained or moderate gestures and exuberant or excessive gestures, just as we can differentiate public gestures from private gestures, gestures of infants from teenage gestures, feminine gestures from masculine gestures, etc.

Beyond this rather rhapsodic array, it is clear that the attempt to unify this phenomenal sphere and to extract certain essential characteristics from such an effervescent multiplicity seems doomed to failure from the very beginning. Therefore, the concept of gesture — which should, in principle, bring together the defining notes of this semantic field — evokes a rather unstable meaning. It is accordingly quite difficult to circumscribe the set of phenomena to which the concept would unequivocally correspond. Gestures are instead to be part of the category of those topics that are well known by default, but about which we discover multiple impediments when we try to determine them explicitly and rigorously. Consequently, we can assume that we are dealing with an "evanescent and ephemeral essence of gesture" (Formis, 2015, p. 9) — in other words, that with the question of gesture, we enter into a rather volatile, rather slippery phenomenal area in which it is fundamentally difficult to establish fixed boundaries between what belongs intrinsically to the concept of gesture and what does not.

How, then, should we understand gesture: as movement or expression, as a sign or an action, as a situation or presence? The 'phenomenon of gesture' — if we are allowed to determine gesture as a phenomenon, as 'what shows itself starting from itself' — is far from being well circumscribed, clearly outlined, univocal, stable within its borders, fixed in a firm structure. How can we capture its meaning, especially if we bring into play related or neighbouring phenomena, such as 'posture' or 'pose,' 'attitude' or 'conduct,' 'behaviour' or 'comportment'? Don't we have to deal with a myriad of situations and contexts that are only roughly defined within the semantic network of the term 'gesture'?

It is clear, however, that the ‘phenomenon of gesture’ is constituted in the diffuse intersection of several existential dimensions, such as embodiment, intersubjectivity, affectivity, and language (the latter understood not only in the sense of communication, but also in the sense of expressivity). For there is no gesture that does not engage the body in a compelling way, just as we cannot conceive of a gesture without implying, in a very special sense, the opening to the other. At the same time, gestures often have a strong emotional charge (that’s why we speak, for example, of gestures of exasperation, indignation, joy, surprise, etc.), even if they often involve the desire to express something specific, which places them on the horizon of discursiveness — in which case, we are confronted with the question of a language of gestures, as well as the relations between gestural language and spoken language. There is accordingly a sphere of gestures translatable into words, to which there corresponds, in reverse, the sphere of verbal units translatable into gestures. Thus, the boundary between gesture and word is often porous, since we are dealing with a ‘translatological’ permeability of meaning from one register to another. But we also have situations in which this permeability is not possible and in which the boundary between gesture and word is rather opaque: we are sometimes confronted with the ‘ineffable’ charge of gestures, just as some of the things we say cannot be gesturally represented at all. The sphere of ‘translatable gestures’ should therefore be contrasted with the sphere of ‘untranslatable gestures,’ that is, with those gestures to which no linguistic units or meaningful contents correspond. And, in return, we should also determine what segment of the spoken language (what layer of it or what kind of discourse) cannot usually be converted or translated into gestures (and why). Thus, in addition to the opposition between the sphere of gestures translatable into words and that of words translatable into gestures, we also have the opposition between the sphere of gestures untranslatable into verbal language and the sphere of those types of discursiveness that cannot be translated into gestures.

The fact that phenomenology, with its specific attention to concrete experience, has deepened in detail some basic structures of human existence — embodiment, intersubjectivity, affectivity, and language — is not a guarantee that, placed at their intertwining, the phenomenon of gesture would easily be captured at the very first attempt. The idea of sketching an eidetic approach to gesture is basically undermined by the fact that gestures always make sense in a determined and concrete cultural-linguistic context, thus always depending on various cultural codes. Since these plural local customs are impossible to universalize, it appears that here too, cultural anthropology once again challenges the eidetic aspirations of phenomenology and its maximalist claims to lawfulness and validity. Indeed, we often speak of ‘typical’ Italian gestures (Jorio, 2001; Kendon, 1995; Poggi, 2002) or French gestures (Calbris, 1990), even in a more particular sense of ‘typical Neapolitan’ or ‘typical Parisian’ gestures, with the idea that ‘certain’ gestures make sense only in and for ‘certain’ particular communities — some of which may have abundant gesticulation, while others may be characterized by rather ascetic and minimalist gesturing. For example, in Heidegger’s “Dialogue on language,” when the Japanese interlocutor recalls Akira Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon*, Heidegger mentions the peculiar “subdued gestures [*verhaltene Gebärden*]” appearing in the film, and emphasizes the difference between Japanese gestures and European gestures: “such gestures [...] differ from our gestures

[solche Gebärden, die anders sind als die unseren]" (Heidegger, 1982, p. 16, 1985, pp. 99–100); moreover, when the Japanese interlocutor performs a minimalist gesture specific to the *Nō* theater, Heidegger simply acknowledges that it can hardly be understood by a Westerner (Heidegger, 1982, p. 18, 1985, p. 102). In this sense, specific gestures are meaningful for specific communities.

These communities do not have to be exclusively geographical; they may very well be of a different nature. For example, the way a speaker at an academic conference wants to gesture that she is going to quote something, raising two fingers and moving them rhythmically, as if 'imitating' the shape of quotation marks, can be incomprehensible to someone who has no connection with the academic community. Here, we can include as well the emblematic gestures of particular communities and subcultures, such as hip-hop gestural stylistics, gestures of heavy metal fans, or the gestures of football team supporters, etc. Moreover, gesture and gesticulation also differ on the historical scale, because it is very possible that a perfectly intelligible gesture in the ancient or medieval world (or even more recently, three centuries ago) would be completely incomprehensible to us, even if historians may attempt skillful reconstructions of the significance of gestures effective in a given epoch and in a specified geographical area (Brubaker, 2009; Depreux, 2009; Walter, 2009), as well as tracing the evolution of the meanings of a gesture from one epoch to another (Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1991; Schmitt, 1990).

Last but not least, the nature of gestures is particularized according to the existential framework in which they occur. In the first instance, we are dealing with the extremely wide and complex sphere of 'everyday' gestures, those that we routinely perform or frequently observe in our daily lives. In this effervescent context of everydayness, gestures either (constantly or intermittently) accompany speech or replace it, taking its place under certain circumstances. Even if the variety of everyday gestures defies any attempt at classification or systematization, we are still compelled to distinguish between two distinct levels. Most of the time the gestures occur in a spontaneous and pre-reflective way, in which case we can speak of unpremeditated, involuntary, and uncontrolled gestures, gestures that visibly concretize the genuine expressivity of an embodied subjectivity. This could be considered the primary form of gesture, that of an original expressive vitality. But gestures also appear in a perfectly voluntary way, when they are performed deliberately, in a controlled and reflective or even 'studied' and 'composed' way. At the first level, that of spontaneous gestures, they can often 'betray' the subject, which can let them transpire even in spite of the subject's conscious intention ('a gesture unwillingly slips out'), in which case we would say that the 'body language' manifests precisely what the verbal language wanted to hide or disguise. In contrast, the second level, that of 'reflective' and 'studied' gestures, usually involves a staging that encodes messages, postures, or attitudes specific to particular situations. Here we can, of course, include the regulated gestures of oratory and rhetoric,¹ but also the gestural specificities of a given context, such as

¹ See Quintilian (1958, pp. 278–279): "I [...] will proceed first to the discussion of gesture which conforms to the voice, and like it, obeys the impulse of the mind. Its importance in oratory is sufficiently clear from the fact that there are many things which it can express without the assistance of words. For

the constellation of gestures made by a politician at a rally, a teacher in front of students, a researcher at an academic conference, a TV reporter in front of the camera, etc. In such cases, we could say that it is, in fact, precisely the framework that prefigures the set of possible gestures in a given situation. Moreover, we could also say that unlike ‘spontaneous’ gestures, the constellation of ‘reflective-studied’ gestures can also be the visible indicator of a deliberate social positioning, because it pretends to exhibit a certain status, providing an effective mark of belonging to — or of aspiring to — a certain social class (for example, we speak of ‘bourgeois gestures’ or ‘aristocratic gestures’).² At the same time, gestures also reflect the hierarchical structure of a society (gestures of domination or gestures of obedience) or its inherent axiological scale — for example, when we distinguish between ‘vulgar’ or ‘trivial’ gestures and ‘high’ or ‘noble’ gestures.

But beyond the extremely complex sphere of everyday gestures, whether spontaneous or reflective, we can also deal with a very special staging of gestures, not only in the contexts of various professional practices (for example, the gestures belonging to the juridical or military spheres are not at all everyday gestures), but also in the horizon of the arts, in which case we can uncover the whole realm of ‘aesthetic’ gestures, whether what is at stake there is the gestures of the actor (in film, theater, or pantomime; see Dutsch, 2013; Pavis, 1981), of the dancer (Lanzalone, 2000; Poesio, 2002; Schacher, 2010), of the musician (conductor or performer; see Gritten & King, 2011; Mazzola *et al.*, 2017; Smart, 2004; Wittry, 2014), or of the plastic artist (designer, painter, or even calligrapher; see Crowther, 2017; Deuber-Mankowsky, 2017; Goldberg, 2004, 2009). We can suppose that in each of these forms of life, the gesturing (gesturality, gesticulation) has a specific charge and a distinct phenomenalization.

Moreover, as a counterpart to the sphere of everydayness, we can also discern a ceremonial sedimentation of gestures in the horizon of the sacred or solemnity. In

we can indicate our will not merely by a gesture of the hands, but also with a nod from the head: signs take the place of language in the dumb, and the movements of the dance are frequently full of meaning, and appeal to the emotions without any aid from words. The temper of the mind can be inferred from the glance and gait, and even speechless animals show anger, joy, or the desire to please by means of the eye and other physical indications. Nor is it wonderful that gesture which depends on various forms of movement should have such power, when pictures, which are silent and motionless, penetrate into our innermost feelings with such power that at times they seem more eloquent than language itself. On the other hand, if gesture and the expression of the face are out of harmony with the speech, if we look cheerful when our words are sad, or shake our heads when making a positive assertion, our words will not only lack weight, but will fail to carry conviction.”

² See the provocative opening of Giorgio Agamben’s text, “Notes on Gesture”: “By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures” (Agamben, 2000a, p. 49), an idea repeated in “Kommerell, or On Gesture” (Agamben, 2000b, p. 83). Social stratifications are also visible on the level of spontaneous gestures, because the expressiveness of ‘specifically proletarian’ or ‘specifically peasant’ gestures is not constituted in relation to a deliberate code, although they are the results of persistent symbolic sedimentations. For example, an analysis of Charlie Chaplin’s gestures can shed light on changes of gesturing, depending on the social context, in the back-and-forth from proletarian poverty to bourgeois luxury (*City Lights*), or from the alienating automatism of technology-captive industrial movements to the free gestures of vagabondage (*Modern Times*); see Jesse H. McKnight (2008) and Kenneth Scott Calhoun (2000). Similar considerations can be identified regarding the gestures, postures, and outfits by which Audrey Hepburn marks class differences in *My Fair Lady*.

the religious horizon, we are dealing with multiple types of ceremonies that involve magical gestures, ritual gestures, liturgical gestures, baptismal gestures, marital gestures, funeral gestures, etc., in various ways (Blanton, 2016; Corbeill, 2004, pp. 12–40; Romberg, 2017). All these gestures have a strong symbolic charge that participates in the immanent space of the horizon in which they are inscribed, often being opaque, if not impenetrable, to an outsider. We are also dealing with ceremonial and formalized gestures in the sphere of political power, whether what is at stake is the codified manners or strict etiquette of the royal courts, the code of conduct of ambassadors, or the ‘solemn’ gestures bearing a political charge at the meeting of officials. Relevant in this context is not only the way in which within some contexts, certain ‘natural’ gestures interfere with and even infiltrate the codified etiquette of an officially solemn situation, but also the casual permeability of these categories, which are far from monolithic. For example, it is significant in this context how a daily gesture with a ceremonial touch, such as a greeting, transforms itself once entered in the political sphere, especially when dictatorial regimes are at stake (Fascist, Nazi, or Communist greetings, etc.; see Allert, 2008; Fulbrook, 2009; Korff, 1992; Winkler, 2009).

Given the complexities I have outlined, we can ask ourselves: from what exact point of departure should gesture be understood? How should this volatile topic be approached? In relation to what, exactly, can the ‘phenomenon of gesture’ be uncovered and described, decoded, or interpreted? If we assume a phenomenological point of view, several equally legitimate ways of investigation open before us: indeed, as previously mentioned, we can understand gesture either starting from the body and movement or from language and expressiveness, either starting from intersubjectivity and otherness or from emotion and affectivity. Let me sketch some of the possible ways in which the phenomenon of the gesture is given for analysis.

3. Gestures Between Bodily Movement and Expression

The gesture can be understood as starting from the body, and especially as starting from bodily movement. Movement is a primordial phenomenon of one’s own embodiment, understood phenomenologically — in the footsteps of Edmund Husserl — as an articulation between *Leib* (the body lived from within) and *Körper* (the body perceived from the outside; see Husserl, 1952, pp. 143–161, 1989, pp. 151–169). The body is not only a perceptual organ, endowed with distinct but concordant sensory fields, but also an organ of movement, a differentiated ‘I can,’ because in it and through it we move: either we move as a whole, or we move certain parts of the body, feeling these movements as such, in a *Sich-bewegen* closely articulated with a *Sich-fühlen* (see Behnke, 1996; Ciocan, 2019; Hardy, 2018, pp. 20–23). Even from a strictly biological point of view, our bodies are in continuous change, in perpetual movement, from the heartbeat and the uninterrupted continuity of breathing to the pulsation of blood, without taking into account the infinitesimal movements (but no less real for the one who observes them in the naturalistic attitude) that take place inside each organ separately. The living body moves, life is movement, and absolute stillness is nothing but the seal of death (even if here bodily decomposition could also be understood as a form of movement). But from a

phenomenological point of view are relevant only those movements that the I performs, either voluntarily or involuntarily, either consciously or unconsciously — therefore subjective movements, i.e., the movements in which the subject is actually engaged. Thus, the infra-subjective movements related to the organicity of our bodies are not pertinent for the phenomenology of gesture.

Gestures should therefore be circumscribed within the sphere of those movements in which the I is existentially involved. All these particular movements, in their diversity, essentially belong to a fundamental existential mobility, one that can be punctuated from time to time by gestures. Gestures, then, adhere to this constant mobility of our lives, just as in the flow of a dancer's continuous movement, each particular gesture finds its own place and pace.³ Gestures must therefore be placed in the realm of subjective movements, characterizing a self that is present in relation to its world, to its fellows, and to itself, movements in which a subjective self is existentially invested. However, being present to oneself implies a certain mode of being awake, so that the nocturnal dimension of the I in the experience of sleep (and its specific movements) is also excluded from the phenomenal sphere of the gesture. Gesture would therefore be relevant for a 'diurnal self,' for an awake consciousness, for an active subjectivity in the world. But even in a sphere delimited in this way, not every bodily movement is necessarily a gesture. Consider the multiple movements that a driver makes while driving: s/he moves the steering wheel with both hands, presses the pedals with the feet, changes gears with the right hand, looks in the mirrors by turning the head slightly, watches the other traffic participants, thus moving the eyes while the head remains motionless. But none of these movements are really gestures. All these movements are 'functional' movements, and their functionality prevents them for being actual gestures.

We could assume from this that gestural movements must be in their essence 'non-functional,' i.e., movements that are not directly subordinated to a specific purpose that the very action of that movement achieves. Functional movements 'do something' in the sense that, in and through them, the subject performs a determinate action for a well-defined purpose (I press the accelerator *in order to* move faster, I press the brake *in order to* slow down), inscribed in the world of concern, in relation to equipment and instruments. Functional movements are mostly regular; they are repetitive and regulated in advance, and they have a certain routine of their own. Gestural movements should therefore not have these specific characteristics of functional movements. They should be movements that are not anchored in the practical world of equipment (consequently, in this precise sense, the specific movements of the carpenter or mechanic are 'functional' movements, not 'gestural' movements),

³ For the relation between gesture and movement in dance, see Elsa Ballanfat (2020, p. 27): "Ici peut s'établir une distinction entre le geste et le mouvement, dans la mesure où le geste dansé est fini: d'un point à un autre du corps, il marque un moment du mouvement qui, lui, en revanche, est appelé à se poursuivre au-delà de la finitude et de l'aspect figuré du geste. Aspect visible d'un moment du mouvement qui passe par le corps, le geste marque le regard, mais est appelé à s'inscrire dans un mouvement conçu comme totalité. C'est en ce sens que les chorégraphes et professeurs poussent les danseurs à poursuivre le mouvement de façon infinie, c'est-à-dire à rattacher le geste qui semble se détacher au processus organique auquel il s'intègre. [...] Même dans une position de travail ou un geste précis fini, visible, marqué formellement, le danseur doit se souvenir qu'il est toujours en mouvement, que le mouvement excède le geste et la position."

but are rooted instead in the intersubjective world of encountering the other. Yet even if the driver mentioned above is talking to someone sitting in the car, the lip movements performed while speaking are not gestural movements; they too should be included in the category of functional movements, even if they are anchored in the common world of being-together. Repetitive movements occur in the intersubjective world as well: for example, the train ticket seller hands the tickets to the person who buys them with standard, routine movements, but we have no reason to assume that these repetitive and serial movements would effectively be 'actual gestures.' The gesture should be non-repetitive, evading routine. And, above all, it should not have a primary practical finality. Nonetheless, we cannot deny that there are also movements that lack such a practical aim, but at the same time are not at all gestures — for example, tics. If a person uncontrollably moves an eye, or trembles at a certain moment, or hisses, we cannot say that all these movements actually constitute gestures, because such movements are still related to the instinctive, pre-subjective or infra-subjective dimension of experience. Therefore, we could say that movements can be determined as gestures only insofar as they fall prey neither to automatisms and instincts, nor to functionalities, nor to routine, nor to repetitiveness, nor to any form of complete absorption in the sphere of practical goals.

It could nevertheless be said that 'the same' movement can be a gesture in one context and not in another. For example, when you rub the spot where a mosquito stung you, that movement of rubbing is not a gesture; in contrast, if you rub your chin 'as when you have a doubt' or when you are thinking deeply (for instance, when you receive a question for which you cannot find a quick response), this movement acquires the meaning of a gesture, insofar as it puts a surplus of meaning into play. Likewise, a simple functional movement (such as digging a hole) is not in itself a gesture, but if it is made in a 'demonstrative' sense, in order to show something, to prove something, or to signify something to another person (as in the inauguration of a construction site), it can enter the sphere of gesture; in this case, we have a 'hybrid movement' — because the main aim of a demonstrative gesture is 'to show something,' not 'to do something' — and what is at stake is once again a surplus of meaning.

The gesture therefore makes its appearance in the space of meaning, and is not fully engaged in the present of the action. A functional movement is completely anchored in the present, even if through its inherent teleology it is linked to a future that it wants to achieve, making it present. In contrast, gestures verge on the future, but do not seem to actually settle in the present. The gesture is not a finalized, complete movement, carried to the end, which actually fulfills its teleology and performs its entire project. The gesture is often given instead as a sketch, as a suggestion; it remains in the phase of prefiguration, and in this sense it has a rather discreet nature, somehow placed in an evasive area of existence, one that does not fully assume its reality. A 'sketched gesture,' or one that is 'barely sketched' — this is how many of our gestures are. Gestures therefore inhabit a space of the latency of our existence without fully biting the flesh of the present. They are not plenary movements that are definitively inscribed in being, but rather quasi-movements, in a kind of retreat or evasion in front of the real. It is as if the gesture, which starts from a pre-phenomenological field of the possible, hesitates fully to inscribe itself in presence

and withdraws instead into the intermediate realm between the possible and the real. Thus, if we were to differentiate between movement *as gesture* and movement *as action*, we could say that the first is evasive, while the second is perfectly decided. The gestural movement takes shape on the horizon of elusiveness, while movement as action is firm and steady. The first is volatile and fleeting, while the second is as real as possible. The first is evanescent and moves in an aura of the possible, while the second is fully implanted in actuality. The first only prefigures, being essentially transient, while the second accomplishes and is something ontologically solid; the first just sketches, while the second categorically defines; the first belongs mainly to the order of meaning, while the second is already caught up in matter.

Even so, with this quasi-reality of the gesture, with this diffuse presence that withdraws from the real, denying its own presence, the gesture essentially engages the body as such. And the pressing question is this: how exactly does the gesture do this? How is the gesture phenomenalized in and through the body? Is the body as a whole the support of gestures, or do they mainly materialize from certain parts of the body? Both variants are possible, because there are gestures that totally engage the body, just as there are gestures that involve only a certain part of it. Dance, for instance, can be understood as a total and self-referential expressive gesture that engages the entire body: the body as a whole is at stake here, and not just a certain part of it. In contrast, we also have gestures that are phenomenalizing rather locally, engaging a certain part of our bodies. For example, most of our gestures are either hand gestures or head gestures. It is true that sometimes we suggest something to someone by simply raising our eyebrows, or by meaningfully closing our eyes, and sometimes we express our dissatisfaction by pursing our lips or by a frown, or we imply something by pointing our gaze in a more insistent way. We can, of course, ask ourselves what the structural relation is between the phenomenon of gesture as such and facial expressions. Is the facial expression simply subordinated to the phenomenon of the gesture, being a main constitutive moment belonging to it? Or are we dealing with distinct phenomena, even if they are perfectly coordinated? For example, a gesture of bewilderment or stupor is constituted by the concordance between a certain facial expression and a certain body position, in most cases of the hands. And if there is a possible discordance between the gesture and the facial expression, the meaning to be expressed may well be undermined.

Gestural movements should accordingly be understood as expressive bodily movements (Heinämaa, 2010; Luo, *forthcoming*). The body is not only an 'I can' of all kinds of movements, but is also an expressive substrate, a background from which the subject expresses meaning. But even if the gestures are basically expressive movements, this does not mean that every expression is in turn a gesture, for there are indeed expressions that are not gestures. We can make, for example, a difference between the 'expression of perplexity' that we read on someone's face and the 'gesture of perplexity' that someone actually performs, engaging the whole body. The expression 'occurs,' while the gesture 'is made,' is 'effectively accomplished' by involving the body, and it refers to the sphere of action, even if it is not actually an action. Likewise, an expression of sadness on someone's face is not, as such, a gesture. Because we notice an expression of astonishment or amazement on someone's face does not necessarily make that expression a gesture as such. The other person's face is essentially

expressive, but it is often a non-gestural expression. And this is because the expression of the face is not fundamentally related to movement, or at least not to that mobility that the actual gestures engage, one that is close to doing and making.

Therefore, just as non-expressive movements are not gestures (for example, the functional, operational, or utilitarian movements integrated into the sphere of praxis), so too the expressions that do not actually engage any visible bodily mobility are not gestures in their turn. We thus have both ‘non-gestural movements’ and ‘non-gestural expressions.’ There are no ‘motionless gestures’ (absolutely unmoving), just as there are no ‘non-expressive gestures,’ because gestures are what they are only within the horizon of significance. However, we also usually place signs in the sphere of significance, in which case we should not avoid the question pertaining to the relation between ‘gesture’ and ‘sign.’ Of course, there are signs that have no primary connection with the body (traffic signs, letters, a knot made in a handkerchief as reminder of something, etc.), and they are not of interest for the question of gesture, but there are also signs that directly involve the body and its movement. People make signs to each other, and they do so by moving their bodies as a whole or in part. And the question is whether all such signs (the ones we do by engaging in bodily movement) are necessarily gestures, or whether only some of them fall into the realm of gesture. If I put my index finger to my lips and signal to someone next to me that that person must be silent, should this situation be understood primarily as a gesture or rather as a sign? Are not the standard movements made by policemen directing traffic, or by those directing the take-off or landing of planes on airport runways, signs rather than gestures, insofar as they are made possible by codification and standardization? And doesn’t the gesture, in its originary meaning, precede this level of standardization and of repetitiveness? Aren’t gestures genuine in the highest degree when they are performed pre-reflectively and ‘unconsciously,’ and precisely when we are not aware of them as such? Do they not have a charge of meaning (without being signs) mainly when they emerge in us without our knowledge, without our will, without our control, in the space of the spontaneous significance of our embodied being, a significance that is thus primarily expressed?

4. Gesture Irreducible to Expression: Heidegger

However, this way of thinking of the gesture as a specific sort of bodily movement in the horizon of expressiveness is not without difficulties. For example, in the Seminars held in Zollikon in May 1965, Heidegger surprisingly brings into play the phenomenon of gesture (*Gebärde*) in an attempt to clarify the problem of the body and its relationship with space, yet he firmly challenges the understanding of gesture starting from expression (Peters, 2019, pp. 447–448). Given that his dialogue partners are largely medical doctors, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists (thus anchored in a naturalistic interpretation of the body as an organism), Heidegger begins by discussing a number of bodily phenomena — such as blushing (*Erröten*)⁴ or grasping (*Greifen*), pain (*Schmerz*), or sadness (*Trauer*) — in order to put into question the dogmatic

⁴ The blush on the cheeks is a motif that already appears in *Sein und Zeit*, where in §7, Heidegger gives this singular example to illustrate a derivative characterization of the phenomenon: “the announcing-itself

differentiation between ‘physical’ and ‘psychic,’ as well as the reductionist-naturalistic tendency to measure the phenomena belonging to embodiment by means of purely quantitative criteria (Heidegger, 1987, pp. 105–107, 2001, pp. 80–82). The phenomenon of ‘movement’ (*Bewegung*) is also immediately called into question using the trivial example of picking up a watch and putting it back down on the table. And Heidegger wonders about the difference between the way the hand moves and the way the watch is moved — namely, the difference between the typical human movement (*sich-bewegen*, self-movement) and the purely spatial movement of a simple thing (*bewegt-sein*, being-moved). This is precisely where the concept of gesture comes in: Heidegger states that the movement of the hand should be understood as a gesture (*Handbewegung als Gebärde*), just as we usually place under the title of gesture the way a certain Dr. Knoepfel touches his forehead with his hand when thinking intensely about a difficult subject (Heidegger, 1987, p. 115, 2001, pp. 88–89, 2018, p. 785). The audience protests, however, because these two types of movement are essentially different, and if we can consider ‘touching the forehead’ as a gesture because it expresses something and makes us think about something, we could not say the same about how the hand picks up a watch from the table.

Heidegger therefore faces a situation similar to the one mentioned above: namely, the assimilation of the notion of gesture exclusively to the sphere of expressive movements, thereby understanding gesture as expression (*Gebärde als Ausdruck*; Heidegger, 1987, p. 116, 2001, p. 89, 2018, p. 786), in which case the other movements could not be considered gestures. However, Heidegger insists that ‘gesture’ should not be understood in terms of expressiveness, precisely because this equivalence is already an interpretation — in this case, one that places the entire issue on the path of the relation between an ‘outside’ (*Aus-, ex-*) and something that we would assume to be ‘behind’ the gesture (*hinter*) and in a certain sense ‘inside,’ something that acts by quasi-causally generating or producing what is expressed. Nevertheless, if we read between the lines, we realize that with this option we would already be caught in the trap of the philosophy of interiority, understanding the subject as encapsulated in its immanent sphere and coming out of it from time to time, thus perpetuating the subject-object dualism and the principle of causality, that is, precisely the structure of the naturalistic attitude that the phenomenological view should fundamentally overcome.

To approach gesture phenomenologically would therefore involve understanding it beyond the traditional differences between body and soul, somatic and psychic, subject and object, inside and outside — and at the same time, without perpetuating in any way the structures of causality, even if they are veiled. To understand gesture phenomenologically would be to let it show itself starting from itself, thus to understand it only in terms of this self-manifestation. Now Heidegger’s thesis is surprising in that he wants to subsume the *whole* embodied movement of human beings in the category of gesture: *each* movement of one’s body, he says, is part of this dynamic of gesture and must be understood as such (“*Jede Bewegung meines Leibes geht als eine Gebärde,*” Heidegger, 1987, p. 118, 2001, p. 91, 2018, p. 787–788). The gesture, he

by something which does not show itself [*Sichmelden durch ein Sichzeigendes*]; see Heidegger (1967, pp. 30–31).

says, characterizes the *whole* of human comportment (*Sich-Betragen des Menschen*) as being-in-the-world essentially determined by the ‘bodying forth of the body’ (*Leiben des Leibes*).

In order to highlight this essential, integrative, and unifying meaning of gesture, Heidegger also discusses the etymology of the term ‘*Gebärde*,’ which, as he points out, refers in the first instance to the root *bären* and its connection with *tragen* (to carry, to bear), *bringen* (to bring) and *gebären* (to give birth). Therefore, gestures ‘carry’ the existential meanings of our being in the world, bringing these meanings to the fore in our lives. At the same time, Heidegger emphasizes the sense of ‘gathering-together’ that the particle *Ge-* involves — a summative or integrative meaning on the model of the mountain range (*Ge-birge*), which is a gathering of mountains (*Bergen*). And he insists that we should also understand gesture (*Gebärde*) in the same sense: as a unification, as a gathering-together or a bringing-together (*Versammlung*) of our comportments in the world, of our existential behaviours. It is in this sense — Heidegger concludes his short excursus about gesture in the *Zollikon Seminars* — that if we understand gesture by taking what the human is in one’s own being as our point of departure, we should determine it as *ein gesammeltes Sich-Betragen* (Heidegger, 1987, p. 118, 2001, p. 90, 2018, p. 787), so that the human’s entire comportment is brought-together or gathered-together.⁵

This idea is anticipated in the already-mentioned “Dialogue on language,” written a decade earlier, in 1953–1954, when the Japanese interlocutor (*J.*), explaining the peculiar *Nō* gesture he just performed in front of Heidegger, suggests that “the gesture subsists less in the visible movement of the hand [*in der sichtbaren Bewegung der Hand*], nor primarily in the stance of the body [*nicht zuerst in der Körperhaltung*]” (Heidegger, 1982, p. 18, 1985, p. 102). This suggestion gives then the occasion for the Inquirer (*I.*), that is Heidegger himself, to articulate the idea of *Gebärde* (gesture) with a network of terms evolving around the root ‘*tragen*’ (to bear), such as *Tragende*, *Zutrag*, and *Entgegentragen*, that the translation can only approximate: “*I.*: Gesture is the gathering of a bearing [*Versammlung eines Tragens*]. [...] Because what truly bears [*das eigentlich Tragende*], only bears itself toward us ... [*uns sich erst zu-trägt ...*] *J.*: ... though we bear only our share to our encounter [*entgegentragen*]. *I.*: While that which bears itself toward us [*was sich uns zuträgt*] has already borne our counterbearing into the gift it bears for us [*unser Entgegentragen schon in den Zutrag eingetragen hat*]. *J.*: Thus you call bearing or gesture [*Gebärde*]: the gathering which originarily unites within itself [*die in sich*

⁵ As I have shown elsewhere (Ciocan, 2015, pp. 475–477), the question of gesture also appears in a context where Heidegger discusses with Medard Boss the relation between embodiment (*das Leiben des Leibes*) and the understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*), namely in a fragment where Heidegger gives the example of the ‘gesture of pointing’ (*Gebärde der Hinzeigens*) a window crossbar (Heidegger, 1987, pp. 244–245, 2001, pp. 196–197). While the limits of the corporeal body (*Körpergrenze*) do not coincide with the limits of the living body (*Leibgrenze*), the horizon of the bodying forth of the body (*Horizont des Leibes*) is co-determined by the horizon of being within which I sojourn (Heidegger, 1987, pp. 112–113, 2001, pp. 86–87). However, in the case of the gesture of pointing, even if the bodying forth of the body ‘extends’ to what is perceived and to what is sensorially seen, the significance of the ‘window crossbar’ as such cannot not be experienced through the bodying forth of the body, but can only be given in an understanding of being (*Seinsverständnis*).

ursprünglich einige Versammlung] what we bear to it and what it bears to us [Entgegentragen und Zutrag]” (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 18–19, 1985, p. 102). However, the unity of this gathering (*Versammlung*) does not arise subsequently from a synthesis of these two intertwined movements, since “all bearing, in giving and encounter [alles Tragen, Zutrag und Entgegentragen], spring first and only from the gathering [erst und nur der Versammlung entquillt]” (Heidegger, 1982, p. 19, 1985, p. 103).

A similar etymological exploration of the term ‘*Gebärde*’ can be found in an even earlier conference entitled *Die Sprache / Language*, that Heidegger held in 1950 and 1951. However, here the stake is not a situation related to embodiment, but a more ordinary relation between the thing (*das Ding*) and the world (*die Welt*). It is as if the idea of gesture — already disconnected from the notion of expression, as we have seen above — is furtherly disconnected from the realm of embodiment as such. The term ‘*Gebärde*’ hints here toward a post-metaphysical understanding of the interminglement of *thing* and *world*. Indeed, in order to indicate the relation of mutual belongingness between thing and world, Heidegger uses the term ‘*Gebärde*,’ not only as a noun, but also as a verb (*gebärden*). Here, the notion of *Gebärde* is thought in the already-mentioned constellation of *carrying, bearing, bringing forth, and giving birth*, in order to suggest that the thing ‘bears’ and ‘gestate’ the world: “By thinging, things carry out world [*Die Dinge tragen, indem sie dingen, Welt aus*]. Our old language calls such carrying *bern, bären* — Old High German *beran* — to bear; hence the words *gebären*, to carry, gestate, give birth, and *Gebärde*, bearing, gesture. Thinging, things are things [*Dingend sind die Dinge Dinge*]. Thinging, they gesture — gestate — world [*Dingend gebärden sie Welt*]” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 200). The same idea is reiterated several times: “Things bear world [*Die Dinge gebärden Welt*]” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 202); “The difference for world and thing *disclosingly appropriates* things into bearing a world [*Der Unter-Schied für Welt und Ding ereignet Dinge in das Gebärden von Welt*]” (Heidegger, 1975, pp. 202–203); “the bearing of things [*die Gebärde der Dinge*]” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 204); “the world’s fourfold fulfills the bearing of the thing [*das Geviert der Welt die Gebärde des Dinges erfüllt*]” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 206). We see that, finally, Heidegger’s use of the term ‘gesture’ is not restricted to bodily phenomena.⁶

⁶ We can equally place Jean-Sébastien Hardy’s recent attempt to develop a “philosophy of gesture” (one that continues his analysis of the meaning of movement in Husserl, but proceeds from the influence of Heidegger and Michel Henry) within this lineage (Hardy, 2018). Gesture is defined here as “pouvoir de la chair”: “les pouvoirs de la chair à ‘faire-monde’ (*welten*), pouvoirs que nous concevons comme autant de gestes” (p. 245). Embodiment is not fundamental, but instituted by gesture: “loin d’être une donnée première et invariable, la chair elle-même apparaît comme le produit d’un geste qui la précède et qui part tout la porte. Du geste à l’action, et de l’action aux sensations de mouvement, c’est là l’ordre de fondation [...]” (p. 27). The relation between the body and the world must be understood on the basis of what brings them together, a pure act that Hardy calls ‘gesture’: “La chair et le monde ne pouvant plus être présumés selon l’opposition constituant-constitué, ils doivent l’être selon leur advenir réciproque à partir de l’acte pur qu’est le geste” (pp. 295–296); “le geste doit être avant que la chair elle-même soit” (p. 295); “la constitution du monde de la vie implique une action invisible de la chair qui ne se résume plus à son activité sensible ou pratique, mais qui renvoie bien à une forme de présence instituante de la chair, au *pouvoir d’un geste*” (p. 250); “À partir du moment où le mouvement n’est plus conçu comme un pouvoir qui appartiendrait à la chair parmi d’autres, le mouvement doit être pensé comme pure effectuation de soi, comme ‘geste’” (p. 293). Understood in this Heideggerian-Henryian sense, the gesture is therefore determined here as

5. Gesture and Affectivity: Flusser

A similar extension or enlargement of the notion of ‘gesture’ is found in Flusser’s stimulating book on gestures (Flusser, 1994, 2014a, 2014b), explicitly presented under the umbrella of phenomenology.⁷ It is true that Flusser also begins with the common opinion of considering gestures as “bodily movements,” referring in this case to those movements motivated by an expressive intention (Flusser, 1994, p. 7, 2014a, p. 1: “*Bewegungen des Körpers, die eine Intention ausdrücken*”). However, he has no reservations about the concept of expression (*Ausdruck*) as we saw above in Heidegger, but rather about the idea of ‘intention,’ which is to him a “questionable” or “uncertain” concept (*zweifelhafter Begriff*; Flusser, 1994, p. 7, 2014a, p. 1; the English translation renders *zweifelhaft* as “unstable”). Therefore, in order to distinguish between those bodily movements that are gestures and movements that are not gestures, Flusser introduces in the first instance an unexpected negative criterion: the possibility of “not having a satisfactory causal explanation” for the movement. More exactly, he says that although causal explanations are necessary for understanding gestures, they are not sufficient for grasping their specificity. This specificity of gestures (*die Spezifität der Gesten*) can only be understood if we approach them through a path that is essentially distinct from that of purely causal explanations. Thus, even if for a certain bodily movement we can find a fully satisfactory causal explanation, that precise movement need not be considered a gesture. Conversely, a movement of the body “for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation [*für die es keine zufriedenstellende kausale Erklärung gibt*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 8, 2014b, p. 2) could nevertheless enter as such into the sphere of gesture. In any case, unlike Heidegger — who, as we have seen, places *all* human movements in the category of the concept of gesture — Flusser reserves this term only for a specific kind of movement.

The gesture is then determined as a “symbolic movement [*symbolische Bewegung*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 10, 2014b, p. 3), and is thereby situated in the space of meaning: the

“pre-mundane,” “expressionless,” “immobile” (pp. 296–299), in that it precedes and makes possible any expression, any mobility, and any constitution of the thing within-the-world.

⁷ The claim that this work assumes a subtle (non-canonical) form of phenomenology can be seen not only in the subtitle of the book (*Versuch einer Phänomenologie*) and the title of the first chapter (*Einübung in die Phänomenologie der Gesten*), but also in a series of recurring themes that appear throughout the book. It is true, however, that in the conclusion of the book (which appears in the French edition, but is lacking in the German edition and its English translation), Flusser points out that the study of ‘gestures’ sheds light on the “limits of the phenomenological method” (Flusser, 2014b, p. 320). As Martha Schwendener (2021, pp. 68–69) shows, Heidegger influence on Flusser is manifold, mainly on the topics of technology and history. Flusser also uses various Heideggerian concepts, such as *Dasein* (Flusser, 1994, pp. 76, 79, 81, 85) or *In-der-Welt-Sein* (Flusser, 1994, pp. 52, 105, 150, 198, 211–212, 231–233, 236). David Bering-Porter (2021, pp. 166–167) also emphasized Flusser’s debt to Heidegger in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, namely “in speculative biology’s investment in phenomenology.” In Flusser’s terms, “The world’s structure mirrors the organism’s structure, and vice-versa. For example, the world’s structure mirrors the human hand. Heidegger distinguishes between two territories in the world: firstly, one of objects that are reachable by the hands (‘present at hand = *vorhanden*’), and secondly, one of objects that are available for the hands (‘ready to hand = *zuhanden*’). The first territory is the future (of hands), ‘nature’. The second territory has already been overcome (by hands), ‘culture’. The first territory is penetrated by the hands via two gestures: ‘grasping’ and ‘manipulating’. The first gesture ‘feels’ objects, the second ‘produces’ them.” (Flusser, 2011b, p. 70).

gesture “depicts something [*etwas darstellt*] because it is a matter of sense-bestowal [*Sinngebung*].”⁸ Such a movement anchored in the horizon of meaning cannot be determined in a purely explanatory way, but must be primarily approached interpretatively. And this is because the “core of the phenomenon” (*Kern des Phänomens*; Flusser, 1994, p. 219, 2014a, p. 163: “the heart of the phenomenon”) of gesture defined as movement relates to the fact that “it expresses a freedom [*durch die sich eine Freiheit ausdrückt*],” thus being “the expression of an interiority [*Ausdruck einer Innerlichkeit*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 220, 2014a, p. 163: “it expresses a subjectivity”). But this freedom, as Flusser mentions at one point, displays “the strange capacity to hide itself in the gesture that expresses it [*die seltsame Fähigkeit, sich in der Geste, die sie ausdrückt, zu verhüllen*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 220, 2014a, p. 164). Therefore, the gesture not only reveals and discloses (*enthüllen*), but also hides and disguises (*verhüllen*).

Flusser’s proximity to Heidegger can certainly be detected here, but is especially accentuated when he brings into play the problem of affectivity, which as I mentioned earlier is, of course, fully relevant to the phenomenology of gestures. Indeed, in the text that opens the German version of the *Gestures*,⁹ Flusser understands this phenomenon in terms of the correlation (but also the tension) between two terms usually connected to the phenomenology of emotions: *Gestimmtheit* and *Stimmungen*. Here too we can detect a certain influence of Heideggerian terminology related to problem of *Befindlichkeit* in *Being and Time*,¹⁰ an influence that can be noticed in other contexts as well. We are therefore dealing with a polarity between the singular form of *Gestimmtheit* (affect)¹¹ and the factual plural dimension of some *Stimmungen*

⁸ “Eine Geste ist sie, weil sie etwas darstellt, weil es sich bei ihr um eine Sinngebung handelt” (Flusser, 1994, p. 11). The English translation says here: “A gesture is one because it represents something, because it is concerned with a meaning.” However, we would reserve ‘to represent/representation’ for *vorstellen / Vorstellung*, rendering *darstellen / Darstellung* by ‘to depict / depiction’ or ‘to present / presentation.’ At the same time, we think Flusser is referring here (implicitly but rigorously) to the Husserlian concept of *Sinngebung*, which should therefore be rendered as ‘sense-bestowal.’ The notion of *Sinngebung* is also tackled in Flusser (2011a, p. 236). For Flusser’s reception of Husserl’s phenomenology, see Lambert Wiesing (2010).

⁹ The French edition (Flusser, 2014b) presents the essays in a different order.

¹⁰ Heidegger (1967, pp. 134–142, §§29–30). The three major ‘affective’ concepts are translated in the two English version of *Being and Time* as follows: *Befindlichkeit* — ‘state of mind’ in John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, ‘attunement’ in Joan Stambaugh; *Gestimmtheit* — ‘being-attuned’ in Macquarrie and Robinson, ‘being in a mood’ in Stambaugh; and *Stimmung* — ‘mood’ in both translations.

¹¹ See the pertinent clarifications of the English translator, Nancy Ann Roth: “The German word *Gestimmtheit*, which also appears in the chapter title, raises difficult questions for a translator. It is a construction that turns the idea of a mood, state of mind, or feeling (*Stimmung*) into a more generalized substantive, something like ‘the condition of experiencing’ a mood or feeling. Perhaps following a similar pattern of word formation, Flusser chose the English *sentimentality* (‘Gesture and Sentimentality,’ typescript, Flusser-Archiv, Berlin) as an equivalent. And yet a contemporary reader of English will almost certainly make many associations with sentimentality that seem distant from the meaning the author is trying to ‘ambush’ (as he puts it) in this essay. The word *attunement*, an equivalent that has appeared in other translations of German philosophy, has the distinct advantage of emphasizing the idea of intention, the phenomenological understanding that consciousness is always consciousness of something, toward which that consciousness is directed, or ‘attuned.’ Still, the word *affect* [...] seemed a better overall match. Not only does its use extend to a number of disciplines, serving one of the important purposes

(moods).¹² Even if Flusser leaves the term ‘*Gestimmtheit*’ initially indeterminate, he develops his reflections on gesture by proceeding precisely from this polarity. Thus, at several points, he emphasizes the relation between these two poles of our emotional lives, saying that affect (*Gestimmtheit*) is “the symbolic depiction of moods through gestures,”¹³ that it is “the way *Stimmungen* (moods) are expressed through gestures” and “transposed into gestures.”¹⁴ Affect (*Gestimmtheit*) is thus “mood transformed into gesture.”¹⁵ Accordingly, between mood (*Stimmung*) and affect (*Gestimmtheit*), we are dealing with a transition, with a leap. And this leap is mediated by gestures: the gesture takes over the simple mood (*Stimmung*), and — in this very symbolic gestural depiction that the gesture performs in this ex-pression — transforms and transposes it into ‘affect’ (*Gestimmtheit*). Thus, here we have sketched the difference between a ‘pre-gestural’ dimension of affectivity (the somewhat brute plurality of spontaneous moods, *Stimmungen*) and a proper gestural dimension of affectivity, one that is ‘refined’ and ‘elaborated’ by gesture (affect, *Gestimmtheit*). Through the verbs Flusser puts into play — *darstellen*, *umsetzen*, *verwandeln*, *ausdrücken* — he thus suggests that *Gestimmtheit* is a ‘structurally modified’ *Stimmung* arrived at through gesture and gestural mediation.

The relevance of these differentiations — which can give the misleading appearance of a simple terminological preciousness — can be grasped in the next step of the analysis, in which Flusser involves the experience of art. Starting from the obvious fact that the mood expressed by a gesture is something completely different from rationality, he emphasizes the idea that it is precisely artistic experience that is singularized as being totally “other than reason” (Flusser, 2014a, p. 5). From here, Flusser advances the suggestion that art and affectivity intertwine¹⁶ and that the work of art can be understood as a “frozen gesture [*erstarrte Geste*].”¹⁷ This idea allows him to deepen the polarity between *Gestimmtheit* and *Stimmungen* still further. For when we are dealing with such a gesture, which — as we have seen — is the “depicting of a mood” (*Darstellen einer Stimmung*), leading to its transfiguration into an affect (*Gestimmtheit*), we are confronted with questions of an aesthetic nature, but not of an ethical or epistemological nature. In other words, we would not ask whether the

of Flusser’s theory of gesture as a whole, but it unites the sense of an internal experience with its external, observable manifestation” (Flusser, 2014a, pp. 177–178).

¹² The English translation of Flusser’s work renders the German term *Stimmung* with ‘state of mind’ (corresponding in the translation of Macquarrie and Robinson to *Befindlichkeit*). However, we will render this term by ‘mood.’

¹³ Flusser (1994, p. 12: “*die symbolische Darstellung von Stimmungen durch Gesten*”) / Flusser (2014a, p. 4: “the symbolic representation of states of mind through gestures”).

¹⁴ Flusser (1994, p. 13: “*Gestimmtheit die Art ist, wie Stimmungen durch Gesten ausgedrückt werden*”; “*Gestimmtheit als der in Gebärden umgesetzten Stimmungen*”) / Flusser (2014a, p. 5: “the way states of mind are expressed through gestures”; “states of mind translated into gestures”).

¹⁵ Flusser (1994, p. 14: “*in Gebärde verwandelte Stimmung*”) / Flusser (2014a, p. 6: “affect is a state of mind transformed into gesticulation”).

¹⁶ Flusser (1994, p. 14: “*Kunst und Gestimmtheit ineinander übergehen*”) / Flusser (2014a, p. 6: “art and affect blend into one another”).

¹⁷ Flusser (1994, pp. 13–14: “*Wenn ich ein Kunstwerk betrachte, interpretiere ich es dann nicht als erstarrte Geste, die symbolisch etwas darstellt, das anders als die Vernunft ist?*”) / Flusser (2014a, pp. 5–6: “When I look at a work of art, do I not interpret it as a frozen gesture that symbolically represents something other than reason?”).

mood that passes through the gesture (thus becoming affect) is ‘lying’ (which would be pertaining to ethics), nor whether it is ‘in line with the truth’ (which would be related to epistemology), but whether the gesture as such ‘touches’ the observer. In other words, what interests us at this level is precisely the ‘impact’ or ‘effect’ of the gesture (*Wirkung der Geste*; Flusser, 1994, p. 14, 2014a, p. 6). Therefore, affect in that particular sense of *Gestimmtheit* — the emotional sense mediated by gestures — first raises aesthetic problems (without raising ethical or epistemological problems), while the concrete moods belonging to the affective life of the individual can raise — in their pre-gestural immediacy — ethical and epistemological (but not aesthetic) problems. In this way, we can more clearly understand the elliptical conclusion that Flusser draws regarding the relation between affectivity and gestures, saying: “Affect [*Gestimmtheit*] releases the moods [*löst die Stimmungen aus*] from their original contexts and allows them to become formal (aesthetic) [*läßt sie ästhetisch (formal) werden*] — to take the form of gestures. They become ‘artificial’ [*künstlich*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 14, 2014a, p. 6).

The fact that affect is understood as an ‘artificial mood’ (*künstliche, artifizielle Stimmung*) is far from being a mere banality, since Flusser insists that, insofar as affect ‘artificializes’ the mood, it is one of the ways in which human beings give “meaning and significance [*Sinn und Bedeutung*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 15, 2014a, p. 6) to the world. In this way, through gesture, human beings leave behind the ‘natural context’ of simple moods and enters the ‘cultural context’ of affect, giving it ‘a symbolic expression.’ And it is through this artificialization of affects that human beings endow the world with meaning. In other words: “Affect [*Gestimmtheit*] ‘spiritualizes’ [*vergeistigt*] the moods [*Stimmungen*], formalizing them into symbolic gestures [*durch deren Formalisierung in symbolischen Gesten*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 15, 2014a, p. 7: “affect ‘intellectualizes’ states of mind”). In this way, the constitutive difference between the ‘primary affectivity’ that constantly infuses factual life (marked by *Stimmungen*) and the ‘secondary affectivity’ specific to art (indicated by *Gestimmtheit*) becomes clearer, the latter manifesting itself essentially through gestures, which effect an ‘artificialization’ of the former. This is why such ‘secondary affectivity’ cannot be scrutinized with epistemological criteria such as the relation between truth and error (*Wahrheit und Irrtum*), or with ethical criteria such as the relation between truth and lie (*Wahrheit und Lüge*), but with aesthetic criteria such as the relation between truth and kitsch. When affect (the transfigured mood) and gesture are at stake, however, truth is understood as ‘authenticity’ (*Echtheit*; Flusser, 1994, p. 16, 2014a, p. 7). The concept of truth therefore appears differently in each of these three areas (epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic), and this is due to the fact that, at the root of these distinct meanings, we have a common sense, that of ‘honesty’ (*Redlichkeit*; Flusser, 1994, p. 16, 2014a, p. 7). Consequently, we can distinguish, says Flusser, between — on the one hand — gestures that, being “ethically and epistemologically honest,” are still “aesthetically dishonest,” and — on the other hand — gestures that are “aesthetically honest,” but not ethically or epistemically honest.

We have seen that when he brings into play the dimension of affectivity and its translation from the spontaneous level of moods lived on the natural level of immediate life to the elaborate level of the cultural realm, Flusser refers in the first instance

to those gestures that we understand as intersubjectively shared emotional expressions pertaining to our bodily movements. Surprisingly, however, he does not stick to this commonly accepted realm of actual gestures, but in other essays included in the book, he analyzes a multitude of activities, practices, and situations that he also places under the title of 'gestures': 'writing,' 'speaking,' 'making,' 'loving,' 'destroying,' 'painting,' 'photographing,' 'filming,' 'turning a mask around,' 'planting,' 'shaving,' 'listening to music,' 'smoking a pipe,' 'telephoning,' 'searching,' etc. Thus, although he takes the idea of 'actual gesture' (the expressive, intersubjective, and affective movement) as his point of departure, Flusser finally proposes an extremely broad concept of gesture, in the sense that it corresponds to something like 'practice,' 'way of life,' 'type of action,' 'mode of activity,' or 'kind of doing' — all of which, of course, involve an embodied subject.

The fact that, in his massive broadening of the concept of gesture, Flusser favours the meaning of 'doing' and 'making' is perfectly consistent with the terminological option under which he conducts his investigation. For, unlike Heidegger, who reflects on the issue of gesture starting from the term '*Gebärde*,' Flusser constantly employs the alternative notion of '*Geste*,' which is obviously introduced in German from the Latin lineage. And the fact that the Latin root is here tacitly privileged puts its mark on the type of semantic extension that Flusser carries out regarding the term 'gesture': Flusser's general usage can be put in etymological connection not so much with the meaning of '*gestus*' (as attitude and bodily movement), but with the line of *gestae* (deeds, acts, actions, feats, achievements; Flusser, 1994, p. 224, 2014a, p. 166), both based on *gero / gerere* (to fulfill, to execute, to do). Therefore, for Flusser, the bodily-expressive-affective-intersubjective significance of the concept of gesture (in the proper sense of gestures and gesticulation) is subsumed under the dimension related to deed and act.

The motivation for this extension lies in Flusser's goal of developing an ambitious "general theory of gestures," outlined in the last section of the book (Flusser, 1994, pp. 217–236, 2014a, pp. 161–176), in which he proposes several classifications of gestures. The first classification concerns the way corporeality is engaged, because as he says, the gestures in which the body itself moves must be clearly differentiated from the gestures in which what is moved is "something else connected to a human body," i.e., a tool. Within each category, other additional differences are possible: not only should we distinguish, for example, between the gesture of moving the fingers and the gesture of moving the pen, but we should also differentiate between the meaning of the gesture of waving with the hand (*Geste des Winkens mit der Hand*) and the gesture of waving with a finger (*Geste des Winkens mit dem Finger*; Flusser, 1994, pp. 222–223, 2014a, p. 165).

Another classification is made according to the orientation or directionality of the gestures, or more precisely, in terms of what they aim at according to their own intentionality: *sich richten*.¹⁸ In this way, four categories of gestures are sketched. First, we have those gestures that are "directed at others" (*Gesten, die sich an andere richten*; Flusser, 1994, p. 224, 2014a, p. 166) and are therefore essentially intersubjective or

¹⁸ We recall that in his course from 1925, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, Heidegger determines intentionality precisely by the term *Sich-richten-auf* (Heidegger, 1979, pp. 37–48).

alterological gestures, gestures that Flusser calls “strictly communicative gestures [*kommunikative Gesten im strengen Sinn*]” (Flusser, 1994, p. 224, 2014a, p. 166) and that we would call ‘actual’ gestures (or gestures *per se*) in everyday life. In this context, he says, we should distinguish between ‘what’ the gesture conveys and ‘how’ it does so, and we must accordingly differentiate between deciphering the expression (*Entziffern des Ausdrucks*) and deciphering the message (*Entziffern der Botschaft*), each with its own aim, its own method, and its own code. In this category, a distinction should therefore be made between “gestures in which the expression dominates” and “gestures in which the message dominates” (Flusser, 1994, p. 225, 2014a, p. 167). Second, we have gestures directed toward a material (*Gesten, die sich auf ein Material richten*), which Flusser calls ‘gestures of work’ *Gesten der Arbeit*. This is the first major extension of the ‘usual’ concept of gesture, and includes any operation performed for a purpose, often by means of a tool. Thus, here we have effective movements, actual activities directed toward an operational finality (what we called ‘functional movements’).¹⁹ Flusser says that, even in the sphere of these *Arbeitsgesten*, we should distinguish between genuine or authentic (*echte*) gestures, which are really the expression of a freedom, and pseudo-gestures (*Pseudogesten*), in which the work as such is alienating (*entfremdend*; Flusser, 1994, pp. 226–227, 2014a, p. 168). A third category is that of gestures that are directed at nothing (*Gesten, die sich an nichts richten*), which Flusser — invoking the *acte gratuit* of André Gide and the theory of the absurd — determines as being *interessefrei* (free of any determined interest) or *zweckfrei* (aimless), a category in which he places completely heterogeneous situations such as “children’s spontaneous jumping,” “action painting,” and “the play of pure logic in abstract symbols” (Flusser, 1994, p. 228, 2014a, p. 169).²⁰ Finally, the fourth category is that of gestures that are “directed (back) at themselves” — *Gesten, die sich auf sich selber (zurück) richten* — gestures that Flusser characterizes as ‘ritual.’ And here as well, he says, we should differentiate between pseudo-ritual gestures (such as magic ones, which are always aimed at a goal) and “truly ritual” gestures, which are “radically anti-magical” in that they are characterized by an essential “aimlessness” or “purposelessness” (*Zweckfreiheit*; Flusser, 1994, pp. 228–229, 2014a, pp. 169–170), which somehow places them in the proximity of the gestures “free of any determined interest” from the third category. However, the gestures belonging to this last category (the ritual ones) are characterized by an essential circularity, visible in their being closed in on themselves, a characteristic that places them in contrast with the “open and linear” (Flusser, 1994, pp. 228–224, 2014a, p. 166) specificity of the first three categories of gestures (the communicative ones, the operational ones, and those free from any interest).

¹⁹ The stratified structure of these operational movements is explored in detail in one of the most penetrating essays in this volume, dedicated to the “gesture of making” (*Geste des Machens*). See Flusser (1994, pp. 49–70) / Flusser (2014a, pp. 32–47).

²⁰ The rendering of *interessefrei* by ‘disinterested’ obscures Flusser’s thought, for what is at stake here is not disinterestedness as in encountering alterity, following Emmanuel Levinas (1979) & (1991), but the absurdity of the lack of any purpose able to activate an interest. Therefore, we should read this notion as ‘non-interested’ or ‘free from any interest.’

These delimitations, Flusser warns us, must not be understood rigidly, because a concrete gestural phenomenon is situated at the intersection of all these categories. Thus, the four categories indicated above (communicative, operative, interest-free, ritual) can equally constitute, although in differentiated degrees, the concreteness of a real gestural phenomenon. In light of the theoretical sketch that Flusser proposes, we could therefore examine the communicative, operative, interest-free, or ritual charge (or weight) of each specific gesture.²¹ For example, in an attempt to contrast his own “general theory of gestures” and the “philosophy of history,”²² Flusser discusses, by way of an illustration, the baroque, or more precisely, the “baroque gesture,” which should be understood — in the light of the above classification — at the convergence between a baroque work gesture, a baroque style of communication, a baroque ritual, and a baroque absurdity. But the “baroque gesture” — characterized by a specific ritual circularity — should not be limited to the historical epoch in which it flourished, says Flusser, because we could explore baroque microelements in contemporary phenomena, whether related to communication, work, or purposelessness. It is true that here the illustrations that Flusser provides (for example, “movements of the spoons of people eating soup,” “freeway bridges,” “gestures in the nursery,” etc.) produce a certain perplexity and make us wonder if the author is actually taunting his all-too-serious readers. Here is, to conclude, the whole passage:

For the general theory of gestures, the “baroque gesture” is above all a specific aspect of ritual gesture as it can be observed in everyday life. It has a circular specificity, for it tends to distort a circular movement toward a parabola or ellipse. The theory of gestures might examine this baroque specificity in the movements of the spoons of people eating soup, so as to move from this and many other similar microelements to look for structurally analogue expressions in other forms of gesture, for example, for baroque elements in communicative gestures (newspaper articles, television programs, etc.), in gestures of work (freeway bridges, pipe forms, philosophical theses, etc.), and in non-interested gestures (e.g., gestures in the nursery, outbursts of anger, or among audiences for a football game or a television program). Having made an inventory of gestures with a baroque character, the theory could research materials most and least appropriate to them. It could then refer to plaster or arithmetic equations as “baroque materials” and window glass or Morse code as “antibaroque materials.”

²¹ Flusser (1994, p. 224: “Die Theorie hätte nämlich dann an jeder gegebenen Geste zu untersuchen, inwieweit sie kommunikativ, inwieweit Arbeit, inwieweit interessefrei und inwieweit rituell ist”) / Flusser (2014a, p. 167: “the theory would then have to inquire of each specific gesture to what extent it was communicative, to what extent work, to what extent disinterested, and to what extent ritual”).

²² “Wenn Geste als Ausdruck einer Freiheit definiert wurde, also als aktives In-der-Welt-Sein, dann ist die Summe der Gesten Geschichte (res gestae)” (Flusser, 1994, p. 230) / “If a gesture is defined as an expression of a freedom, that is, as an active being-in-the-world, then the sum of gestures (*res gestae*) is history” (Flusser, 2014a, p. 171). I must emphasize, however, that this whole segment of the English translation (Flusser, 2014a, pp. 171–174) is unfortunately quite incomprehensible, since the German term *Geschichtsphilosophie*, namely, the ‘philosophy of history,’ is rendered no less than 21 times by ‘history of philosophy’ (which in German is *Geschichte der Philosophie*), and it would, of course, be desirable to correct this error in a second edition.

The theory could go on to draw a picture of the freedom expressed in the baroque gesture: a freedom that tends to be in the world ritually and that expresses this tendency in all its actions. (Flusser, 1994, pp. 232–233, 2014a, pp. 172–173; translation partially modified)

6. Conclusion

With Heidegger and Flusser, we have discovered two distinct phenomenological voices that carry out two equally substantial enlargements of the concept of gesture, although in different directions and with different purposes. On the one hand, we have seen that Heidegger extends the concept of gesture in order to cover all movements that human beings can make, but contests the pertinence of the notion of ‘expression’ for understanding this phenomenon. This ‘holistic view,’ which expands the notion of gesture so that it corresponds to our entire existential mobility, is also connected with the idea of ‘gathering-together,’ which is uncovered by Heidegger by means of an exploration of the etymological potentiality of the German word ‘*Gebärde*.’ It is obvious that Heidegger’s main aim is not at all to clarify phenomenologically the structure of actual gestures, but to think, in a unitary way, the originary meaning of specifically human bodily movement, in contrast to the simple spatial movement of a thing. The three vectors — constant in Heideggerian thought — are here in place in order to define the essence of a phenomenon: unity, totality, and originarity. It is in terms of these three vectors that Heidegger fundamentally re-signifies the notion of gesture by essentializing its meaning as the gathering-together of our entire compartment. We can, however, ask if the specificity of concrete proper gestures, in their peculiar phenomenality, can still be captured as such in light of Heidegger’s suggestions. Indeed, the total broadening that Heidegger performs on the term ‘gesture’ — employed, as we have seen, even in a non-bodily realm, in order to indicate a post-metaphysical understanding of the relation of *thing* and *word* — cannot readily be correlated with particularly determined gestures in their diversity. How can what we concretely call ‘gesture in the proper sense’ (gesture *per se*, or gesture ‘as such’) be described in light of this Heideggerian concept, which indicates instead the essence of human bodily mobility?

On the other hand, we have seen that, although Flusser begins with a clear-cut sense of gestures (as expressive, symbolic bodily movements, irreducible to causal explanations, intersubjectively anchored and emotionally determined), he comes to integrate under the notion of gesture a multitude of human practices that current speech is reluctant to label as ‘gestures.’ Indeed, instead of saying the ‘gesture’ of shaving or the ‘gesture’ of planting, one could equally well say the ‘practice’ of shaving and the ‘practice’ of planting. And instead of talking about the ‘gesture of writing’ or the ‘gesture of destroying,’ one might as well invoke the ‘act of writing’ or the ‘act of destruction,’ just as instead of referring to ‘the gesture of photographing’ or the ‘gesture of telephoning,’ one can just as well evoke the ‘fact’ of taking a picture or making a phone call, since those practices that Flusser calls ‘gestures’ are basically all about ‘doing’ — ‘accomplishing,’ ‘achieving,’ ‘carrying out’ — (since ‘fact’ comes from *facere*). However, doesn’t gesture as such, in its primary concrete meaning, simply vanish among all these human practices? Indeed, the most obvious risk is that,

through this extension, the notion of gesture becomes even more diffuse, more confusing, more indeterminate than it already is — and the modes of appearance of gestures are already excessively plural, involving an exuberant phenomenality that gestural studies strive to circumscribe in a detailed manner. The dilemma of the phenomenological approach to gesture consists precisely in this continuous oscillation between the plural concreteness of gestural appearances, in their unlimited and inexhaustible ramifications, and the irrepressible temptation to search for an originary and unitary layer that allows them to hold together. But isn't it precisely this constant tendency to seek the originary that prevents phenomenology from approaching gestural phenomena in a more concrete way, without immediately losing sight of them? Perhaps an applied micro-phenomenology, or a minimalist phenomenology, would be more suitable for descriptively uncovering these evanescent phenomena we call 'gestures.'

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