



# Dancing in the office: A study of gestures as resistance

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## ABSTRACT

Following the art-body-ethics turn in management studies we use dance as an analogy in order to explore how the body can resist organisational control in office work contexts. We argue that in office work gestures can be a site of post-recognition resistance. Drawing on two art videos and on dance studies, we explain that this is operated either through arrest or through flow. In fact aesthetic experiments in gesturing disrupt the work rhythm needed for organisational efficiency and enforced by organisational control. This allows us to contribute primarily to the literature on resistance in organisation studies and relatedly to the growing literature on dance in organisation studies through demonstrating how dance can be a source of resistance.

## 1. Introduction

This article wants to contribute to the ‘post-recognition’ turn (Fleming, 2016) in studies about resistance at work.<sup>1</sup> The context of the study is the way bodies move in the office and the underlying question is related to our embodied agency. Drawing on dance studies (Ruprecht, 2015) and using dance as an ‘analogy’ and a ‘heuristic device’ (Chandler, 2012: 876), we argue that gestures either through arrest or through flow can be a site of resistance to organisational control. Using dance as an analogy will allow us to emphasise the embodied aspect of resistance in rather disembodied office work. Through the analysis of two dance performance videos, we will follow Chandler (2012: 876) in providing ‘attentiveness to the rhythms of work – and to disruptions and breaks in rhythm’. This will allow us to focus on the ‘immediate physicality of work’ as a potential for resistance (Chandler, 2012: 874), mainly conceptualized as ‘post-recognition’ (Fleming, 2016). Resistance operates through a parasitizing or a disruption – for instance through manipulating objects or through moving in the office – of efficient office work rhythms. However, dialogue or verbal interaction with management is not sought. A secondary, related contribution of this article will be to the growing literature on dance in organisation studies as dance is in most of the cases not used to understand resistance, but rather as a way to reflect upon teams (Harrison & Rouse, 2014), leadership (Biehl-

Missal & Springborg, 2015) or ‘feminine creation’ (Biehl-Missal, 2016).

We understand ‘gestures’ as ‘simply what people do with hands or other parts of the body’ (ten Bos, 2011: 282), that is to say body movements. Then, dance can be understood as a combination of gestures and ‘movement in space and time’ (Biehl-Missal, 2016: 184). In fact, dance studies contrast gesture with immobility and connect it to rhythm. Furthermore, Ruprecht (2015) suggests that gesture can be conceptualized both as flow and arrest, as ongoing movement and stillness, linking it to different conceptions of embodied agency. Focusing on gestures allows us to provide a kind of micro-phenomenology of office work. As ‘dance is primarily a non-verbal medium’ (Chandler, 2012: 872), we will analyse how this physicality of gestures can resist organisational control through ‘post-recognition’ (Fleming, 2016). In fact, recognition (Honeth, 1996) entails from employees a practice of ‘participating in dialogue with those whom they resist’ (Fleming, 2016: 108) in the context of workplace resistance as exemplified for instance by collective resistance performed by French workers in the ‘insurance sector’ (Courpasson, 2016: 97). In other words, resistance looking for recognition favours communication and words whereas post-recognition is more articulated to the physicality of gesture and could be body-based, in particular through disruption of organisational control through flow and/or arrest.

It is not unusual that organisations invite experimental artists to

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<sup>1</sup> There is extensive literature on resistance in organisation studies taking a variety of approaches ranging from labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Edwards et al., 1995), Foucauldian (eg, Collinson, 2005; Fleming, 2006) to feminism (eg, Thomas and Davies, 2005) or inspired by Žižek (Contu, 2008). We understand resistance as a disruption of organisational control either at the micro level or the macro level. With gesture as seen by dance studies and dance experiments, the body appears as the main actor of disruption of organisational control. Our contribution draws on the ‘post-recognition turn’ (Fleming, 2016) at the bodily level of the gesture. We are not suggesting that other types of resistance connected to recognition (eg, Courpasson, 2016) or more subjective forms (eg, Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Harding, Ford, & Lee, 2017) would not be relevant. For a recent and comprehensive review of the literature on resistance in organisation studies, see Mumby, Thomas, Ignasi, and Seidl (2017).

intervene in their workplaces in the name of creativity and experimentation (for an overview see e.g., Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, 2016). This paper deals with two art videos based on gestures and resulting from two artistic interventions in office contexts: *Faire* by Marie Reinert (<https://vimeo.com/43380554>) and *BUERO* by franzthomaspeter ([http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video\\_detail.php?id=1&lang=en](http://www.franzthomaspeter.com/video_detail.php?id=1&lang=en)), both produced independently in 2008, the first one in France and the second one in Austria. The videos were chosen because of their complementarity and the interesting discussions on gestures and bodily movements in offices that emerged when we confronted them at the beginning of our research process in 2013. The videos are a very suggestive empirical material: indeed, they do not simply describe office work, they show both its aesthetic and political potential, which is linked to a specific kind of gesturing. In a kind of aesthetic micro-phenomenology, the videos give a new intensity and thickness to office work. Depending on the working context both an aesthetic of flow (fast and melted gestures) and an aesthetic of arrest (slow and detached gestures) point at embodied resistance practices.

First, we will analyse how gesture was understood by management and organisation studies and how our approach is different. Second, we will review gesture and the study of dance in order to contextualise our work in relation to other studies upon dance in our field, in particular Chandler (2012) notion that dance is a useful ‘analogy’. This will also allow us to introduce Ruprecht (2015) argument within the framework of dance studies. Third, we will explain our methodology and how we analysed the videos. Fourth, we will provide an analysis of the gestures as they appear in the videos. Fifth, we will carry out a discussion and link our double contribution to resistance practices at work and dance in organisation studies.

## 2. Gesture in management and organisation studies

Gestures in management studies were first conceptualised by Taylorism and its project to measure and standardise motions of workers’ bodies within a functionalist framework (Taylor, 1911). The idea to measure workers in order to increase efficiency entailed an interest for gestures in industrial contexts through motion studies (Karsten, 1996). The main project was to integrate the detailed analysis of motion in scientific management in order to determine the single best gesture for every organisational task. This was underpinned by a functionalist agenda which is disconnected from our intention to link gesture with resistance, as opposed to control.

Since work has become much more immaterial, the study of gestures seem to be confined to the field of ergonomics or human-machine interaction, in short specific fields of engineering. Management does not seem concerned with physical gestures, as if the discipline had totally forgotten that the word “hand” (*mano*, *maneggiare*) constitutes it. Only recently started organisational scholars to show a renewed interest in different aspects of gesture, just to begin with its absence in contexts of leadership. A study of managers’ embodiment at annual meetings shows how gestures are avoided as they run the risk of introducing contradiction or emotions in a rational context (Biehl-Missal, 2011). Sticking to words, facts and an organisational script thus often means avoiding too personal gestures.

Gestures always relate to the embodiment of work. For a whole range of occupations, gestures are an essential part of the work, for example at school, in the traffic or in surgical work where instruments combined with appropriate gestures often replace words (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007). However, we will analyse how gestures move away from a working purpose or task to create bodily movement disconnected from a directly functional movement, for example the right gesture to perform successful surgery. Objects also play a crucial role as their use changes our embodiment. Surgical work nowadays means more and more interaction with robots, which are very special objects. But it is enough to think about our use of various digital artefacts; not only have our gestures become very precise and small with the manipulation of

smartphones and laptops but our heads tend to be bent on screens and our ears filled with earphones, the body being both subjected and amplified by technology.

Furthermore, an individual gesture can become a bodily engagement and sometimes even a political action, as Willy Brandt’s genuflexion in Warsaw in 1970 shows (ten Bos, 2011), but also Rosa Parks’ refusal to give her seat to a white man (Clarke, 2000). Uncommon actions of generosity in the business world have been labelled *beaux gestes*, underlying a close relation between ethics and aesthetics and thus linking the medieval knightly tales to stories about our leaders’ outstanding actions (Bouilloud & Deslandes, 2015). However, these political gestures or *beaux gestes* have a much more clearly communicative purpose than the gestures we will analyse. Genuflexion in Western culture has an unambiguous meaning of deference and respect, for instance to meet the Pope. Similarly, Rosa Park’s gesture can be unambiguously interpreted because it effectively violated segregationist Jim Crow laws; therefore she was immediately ordered to stop it. All of them are voluntary and are about sending a message, as opposed to the gestures we will analyse. In addition, the gestures of our videos will not be extra-ordinary – out of the routine of work – but will relate to mundane work activities.

In this perspective a study of factory workers’ gestures (based on secondary data) suggests their aesthetic dimension is often forgotten (Bazin, 2013). Bazin argues gestures have a dimension of elegance, here opposed to rigidity: ‘through experience, some workers develop such an accurate gesture that their elegance not only is visible to their peers but is also blindingly obvious to anyone, in total opposition with the ungraceful mechanical rigidity of the apprentice’ (2013: 389). Elegance thus has to do with ease of movement and accuracy, which comes from repetition, when the body learns and becomes one with the gesture. The present article emphasises the potential of working gestures to exist as resistance, and we will show that repetition and accuracy are still central aspects in the process of embodied everyday resistance.

As we have seen in this brief literature review, managerial, industrial and surgical work have been analysed through the lens of gestures in organisation studies but office work has not yet been an object of attention, perhaps because of its apparent immobility, which does not necessarily mean disembodiment. Office work being a condition that links many of us, its embodied and sensual aspects would definitely deserve closer attention and analysis, in particular from the perspective of resistance.

## 3. Gesture and the study of dance

In this section we will review the engagement of management and organisation studies with dance, which will ultimately lead us to engage with recent developments in dance studies.

Gesture and dance are inherently related; indeed a series of gestures either individually or collectively bring about dancing. Stating that work has many common aspects with dance, management scholars have recently engaged with dance. Relying on their observation of modern dance rehearsals, they state that coordination needs to be elastic, respecting both constraints of teamwork and autonomy of bodies, using both integration and de-integration (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). An ethnographic study of professional dancers shows how embodied agency is related both to vulnerability and passion as expressed off and on-stage in very demanding careers (Satama, 2015). These authors look at dance from the perspective of work to address issues as bodies’ coordination and agency.

In opposition to this, looking at work from the perspective of dance as the present article does can bring forward new questions regarding movement from the within of movement and thus processes of embodied resistance. As we already mentioned we will draw on Chandler (2012) use of dance as ‘analogy’ to understanding work as this allows to recognize the body as of central importance... to focus... on its movement in relation to others and to the setting [in which it is operating]

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