How to Do Things With(out?) Words - The Dramaturgy of Dance and Movement in Jérôme Bel's "Gala"

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Abstract: *As a multidisciplinary approach, this research is based on the works of thinkers like Roman Jakobson, Yuval Noah Harari, Charles Darwin, William Shakespeare, Adolphe Appia, Martin Esslin, Hans-Thies Lehmann et al. Its train of thought follows the theory that everything is a code and that even nonverbal communication relies, just like its verbal counterpart, on words as omnipresent in our individual and social existence, from the cradle to the grave. Words are, more often than not, equated here not only linguistically, with lexemes (Ulrike Mosel), but also, philosophically, with any kind of encoded thoughts, in the signification given to them by Jacques Derrida as parts of an all-encompassing text. A parallel between the stage and the world in terms of human communication is drawn in the hereby study by isolating the verbal and the nonverbal manner of conveying emotion and, thus, meaning, with a particular emphasis on Jérôme Bel's 2015 highly-rated performance, "Gala", viewed as an example of good practices in the dramaturgy of dance and movement. The research method is connected to dialectics and it becomes visible in the dissection of an algorithm ('with' -, without -, 'with and without' - words), while the research methodology includes elements of cultural anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, semantics, semiology, aesthetics, and, last but not least, performing arts studies.*

Key words: *dance; dramaturgy; language; nonverbal; verbal.*

> I'm interested in understanding what is the thing
> that dance is able to reveal and the word is not.
> Jérôme Bel apud. Grigorescu & Popov 2018, 134

1. How to do things with(out?) words - "Show, don't tell!" and the bigger picture of dramaturgy

> "One cannot not communicate."
> Paul Watzlawick(Watzlawick et al. 1967)

While paraphrasing the title of J. L. Austin's seminal work, *How to Do Things With Words* (Austin 1962; 1976), the hereby paper - unlike Jérôme Bel's *Gala*, which is genuinely celebratory and, as such, remains true to the word that names it - questions its own. The main it aims to convey is that we cannot do things without words - often regarded here in a metaphorical dimension as codes. Also, besides their literal

lexicological value, words as concepts are seen metonymically, as only one of the many reflections of an all-encompassing code, the biological version of which is DNA. The idea that everything is a code - whether we speak of DNA for living organisms, JavaScript, HTML5, CSS3, PHP for webpages or words/thoughts in the case of the verbal/nonverbal languages we use to communicate - has been brought to light, besides philosophers et al. by scientists and anthropologists alike (e. g. Darwin 1859; 2003, Harari 2017, Harari 2024, Dawkins 1976; 2006).

"A spoken language is a body, a living creature, whose physiognomy is verbal and whose visceral functions are linguistic." (Berger 2016, 5) On a philosophical level, according to Jacques Derrida (1976, 158), one of the most prominent postmodern thinkers, "There is nothing outside of the text". This statement has been the subject of hermeneutical analyses ever since it was first printed. Any text relies on meaning, and, were we to deconstruct it, we would find that this meaning is conveyed by words (which are, undeniably, again and again, codes, as proven by morphology, lexicology, semantics, semiotics and communication sciences, among others). Even though we can split words into phonemes, morphemes and other subunits, like the atom was split, we shall not, for the sake of this research, go into such details, only understandable in this context within the vernacular of philology.

Derrida's idea that there can be nothing outside of the text seems to have been preceded by several considerations on meaning, such as the statement belonging to behavioural scientist Paul Watzlawick, who argues that "one cannot not communicate. That is, even if communication is being avoided, whether by the unconscious use of nonverbals or not, it becomes a form of communication" (Watzlawick et al. 1967; Motley 1990). In his turn, by philosophically interpreting the notion of "text", Derrida seems to tell us that there is nothing outside of language. Astrophysics and theology are still debating the meaning of life - the former, by studying the Big Bang, and the latter, by looking at *logos* from a spiritual perspective[1]. Anthropology, on the other hand, comes to the aid of the philosophical idea that, within the *logos*, language and meaning are intrinsically connected, by studying how language is essential to humans: as social beings, we have always clustered around a communicational nexus (Harari 2024, Morris 2021). Throughout history, we have survived by conveying meaning that interconnects us as a species, finding that everything *tells* something - including nonverbal language, the semantical, implicit level of which becomes manifest, explicit in the act of *showing*. From ancient sacred rituals to nowadays theatre, we have been conveying meaning symbolically. I must rely, in this respect, on Ferdinand de Saussure's *signifiant-signifié* paradigm, revolutionary in the field of linguistics (Saussure 1959), and extrapolate it to

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[1]"*logos*, in ancient Greek philosophy and early Christian theology - the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning. [...] In the first chapter of *The Gospel According to John*, Jesus Christ is identified as «the Word» (Greek *logos*) incarnated, or made flesh". (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2024).

nonverbal languages, as well. It becomes, then, obvious that, as long as a word or a gesture signifies something, the person telling/saying (using verbal language) or showing/doing (using nonverbal language) uses a signifier to reach a signified in order to create meaning. Since the matter of communicating that meaning is connected to semantics and semiology, I cannot avoid resorting to the findings of Roman Jakobson, who structured the space of communication in terms of six related elements: context, sender, receiver, message, code, and channel. A sender transmits a message to a receiver through a channel. The sender and the receiver need a common code for encoding and decoding the conveyed meaning. (Jakobson 1971; 2002).

At this point of my theoretical exposé, it seems only fitting to delve a little deeper into the way verbal and nonverbal languages are intertwined. Researchers have revealed the immense importance of nonverbal language (facial and bodily expression, dress codes etc.) in our day-to-day interactions as a subsequent and consistent layer of verbal communication, associating nonverbal communication to thoughts (codes) as seen from a neurological perspective: the nonverbal cues come from our mirror neurons (Givens & White 2021), but all our neurons "speak" languages. By looking at words and thoughts in terms of our own "programming" and from an anthropological point of view, we can see and understand humanity as "embodied thought"[2], which is also a defining feature of any work of art, whatever its medium might be[3].

Since "one cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick et al. 1967), even though the process of communication works differently in art than in our daily lives and takes place on more than one level, Marshall McLuhan's (1964) groundbreaking statement, "the medium is the message" applies to both life and art. If the reader bears with me, it will become clear that, in the case of the stage-audience interaction, the "message" *is* the emotion. When it comes to the theatrical communication process, including nonverbal productions such as pantomime and dance theatre, most analyses of theatre semiotics (Esslin 1990; Ubersfeld 1999; Runcan 2005; Popescu 2011 et al.) reveal the mechanism of symbolic meaning creation and interpretation and the way "messages"[4] are sent from the stage to the auditorium.

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[2] Besides Bauer (see *infra*), also see Johnson 2025, Harmon 2023, Cadariu 2020.

[3] It is the very idea Una Bauer postulates when analysing Jérôme Bel's work: "I argue that Bel's work as a choreographer involves creating the movement of thought (an embodied thought, not an abstract concept)" (Bauer 2008).

[4] I am aware that the term "message", when it comes to its being employed within the scope of the arts, is a sensitive one for critics and theorists, not unlike the "Show, don't tell!" principle has become for the author of this study, whose opinion is that the latter has generated a cliché-submerged way of writing generating sketched characters, shallow stories and moralistic embedded, univocal messages, a way of writing which can be noticed at its peak in the film industry, especially in the sector of action movies. I shall return to the "Show, don't tell!" and "message" issues further on, since they are central to this research.

Turning to theatre practice, it has recently become clear that creating a meaningful aesthetic experience for the audience requires a new kind of practitioner. As a consequence, a professional position came into existence besides the director, the actors, playwright, set designer and other members of the artistic and technical team: most productions have a stage dramaturg. While in the case of text-based theatre performances the playwright is acknowledged as a creative writer, and what they do is to write a play, when it comes to the dramaturg, whether we speak of verbal or nonverbal theatre, their job seems to go in the direction of "editing" a production. Since "dramaturg" and "dramaturgy" have not completely shedded their hazy nature as a position and craft, respectively, a definition seems appropriate:

> In theatre, a dramaturg and playwright collaborate. The dramaturg nurtures and supports the playwright's voice with well-timed feedback on structure, content, context, and audience expectations. Like an editor, a dramaturg also works with other departments (marketing, production, audience engagement, etc.) to make sure they understand the work and represent it well in their efforts.
>
> Craft 2021

It is, perhaps, the right time to emphasise that the playwright and the dramaturg have another thing in common, in addition to their "wordsmith" status: they have to deal with underlying, unseen, behind-the-scenes, laboratory-specific work which involves the concept and structure of a performance. Nevertheless, the dramaturg's material is not only connected to verbal language as a living organism, but to a more complex one: the syncretic "biology" of a performance.

Having clarified what a dramaturg and stage dramaturgy are, I am able to look beyond the *genus proximus* and reach the *differentia specifica* of the dramaturgy of dance and movement. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that, just like a play or a work of fiction, which are written with words, dance, too, is written: with movements, gestures, bodily (including facial) expressions[5].

When it comes to the dramaturgy of nonverbal performances, the in-depth tailoring for which a dramaturg is responsible is mostly done with the purpose of organising the nonverbal yet built-to-signify material of gestures and movements. (see Bowditch et al. 2018). Whether they are verbal or nonverbal languages, the dramaturg, among many other professionals involved in a stage production, has to work with both. After all, any performance involves more than one language.

The saying "Show, don't tell!" remains, however, especially from a philosophical point of view, sophistically in nature. We cannot, simply and meaninglessly show. There is nothing outside of (any kind of) language, and since a language is used to convey meaning, even when we show, (offstage or on it) what we actually do is *to tell*. Due to Jakobson's findings on the way language is involved in coding and

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[5] Choreo*graphy* (s.m.) "from the Greek for 'dance' and for 'write'. (Britannica 2023).

decoding messages, one can ascertain that implicit meaning always becomes explicit by virtue of the coding-decoding mechanism we use when communicating, even when we do it nonverbally.

To tackle the core meaning of the "show-don't-tell" doctrine even more, let us look at its "translation". This doctrine was initially aimed at writers, playwrights and script writers, urging them to offer fewer statements by the characters and more actions. This "golden rule" is generally seen as a prerequisite for any successful text. Nevertheless, if we look at it through the lens of semantics, semiology, linguistics, theatre studies, film studies, philosophy and anthropology, the fact that there cannot really be a "show, don't tell!" becomes indisputable.

In terms of "showing", i. e. "action", a gesture performed onstage implicitly "tells" the spectators what/how to feel and, if the performance is well-tailored in its dramaturgy, the audience reacts explicitly, as if having received "the message". In an attempt to demystify many a theorist's recoiling reaction to the very use of the word "message" in the context of art criticism, I reiterate here the fact that communication, already established as a *sine qua non* both in life and in art, cannot take place without a message. (Watzlawick et al. 1967, Jakobson 1971; 2002). The "message" is always there, even if it is, as noted above, connotative (i.e. emotional) and not denotative (i.e. informative).

The language of dance being nonverbal, what an audience can grasp of its dramaturgy is based on sequential or simultaneous actions, movements or gestures, not on (literal) words. Those remain behind the scenes, in the dramaturg's notebook on the storyline or scenes, in their annotations on the concept proposed by the creator of the performance and its team. But even so, even if they are only used in the background of a nonverbal performance, words are there. We cannot do things without words.

To rephrase the paradigm proposed in this study, since "One cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick et al. 1967), even "showing" is "telling". Thus, it becomes clear that what dance (seen here as an isolated example of other types of nonverbal theatre) does is to tell by showing, eliciting, thus, through connotative language, emotional responses in the spectator as a consequence of an instance of decoding that language.

2. Jérôme Bel's *Gala* - "Show" versus "Tell "

Not all choreographers avoid words onstage, however, not even in dance or dance theatre. In this respect, no one seems more suitable as an example of good practices in the field of the dramaturgy of dance and movement than Jérôme Bel. Parts of his 2015 performance, *Gala*, which is mostly nonverbal, but not quite, are built on the dichotomy between "show" and "tell". In this auteur piece, dance often occurs as nonverbal dissent towards what is presented to the audience verbally. While playing with words on a semantical level, often showing *not* what is told, but something completely different, occasionally even the opposite, *Gala* celebrates life and unity through diversity.

On Jérôme Bel's official website, the biographical *captatio benevolentiae* is succinct and simple: "Jérôme Bel was born in 1964, he lives in Paris. He works worldwide." (s. a. RB Jérôme Bel 2025). If one takes a closer look, though, at his life and work, the spectacular emerges. As the *Sadler's Wells* dance company team summarises, he's a philosopher of dance, interested in poststructuralism, semiotics, the work of Barthes and Foucault, a provocateur in terms of convention-breaking and -remaking, and terms like "conceptual dance" and "non-dance" might be just appropriate for describing his work (Sadler's Wells 2015, online).

Having attended the 2017 Bucharest version of *Gala*[6], I learned that whenever the show goes on tour, the hosting institution actually casts people from the city where the it is performed, most of whom are not professional actors and are offered the possibility to go onstage for one night. The performance, which "has been franchised, as a portable structure, capable of being re-staged in various locations internationally" (Foster 2022, 127-128), brings together individuals from all walks of life, and in doing so it holds up an onstage mirror (generating, thus, a synecdoche) to the audience (hyperbolically enhanced as the whole of society) in a celebratory manner consistent with its title. Moreover, *Gala* invites the spectators to muse on the very idea of what theatre is. Gerald Siegmund describes his experience as a spectator:

> At the beginning of Jérôme Bel's piece Gala from 2015, as in his other pieces [...] the stage is empty. [...] The back wall of the theatre is covered by a curtain that parts in the middle, audibly whizzing open to mark the beginning of the show. The drawn curtain reveals a solid back wall that serves as the screen for a film projection. Indeed, the spatial set-up reminds me of a cinema with the significant difference, however, that in front of the screen this glaringly empty huge plateau of a theatre stage intervenes. [...] The film is a montage of individual photographs of empty theatres. After about ten minutes the curtain closes again.
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> <div align="right">Siegmund 2017, 1-4</div>

The version I attended in Bucharest unfolds according to the same algorithm as the Viennese version described by Siegmund:

> For a few precious seconds nothing happens until a figure emerges from behind a curtain on the left side of the stage and places a calendar upright on the floor. It is a DIN A2 art calendar whose pages, however, do not display the colourful reproductions of paintings but their white backside. On the white page addressing the audience a handwritten instruction reads "Ballett/Ballet". [...] A female dancer enters from the left side of the stage and walks up to the middle of the proscenium. Already from the way she walks [...] it becomes apparent that she is not a trained dancer. [...]18 dancers follow the first one. One by one they perform their pirouettes [...]. The 19 performers

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[6] For further info see Teatrul Odeon 2017, online;

possess different technical skills. Some pirouettes are actually very good. The per-
formers differ in age, sex, gender, height and physique, and are of different ethnic
backgrounds. [...] They do as the words tell them. [...] In *Gala* there are eight chap-
ters. [...] After the introduction of empty theatres projected on the back wall and the
"ballet" section, a chapter with a "Walzer/waltz" follows [...].The remaining sections
are "Improvisation" (for three minutes the entire company spreads across the stage to
improvise in silence), "Michael Jackson" (a string of 19 moonwalks to Jackson's Billy
Jean), "Verbeugung/Bow" (a series of 36 bows, two for each performer), "Solo" and,
finally, "Kompanie/Kompanie/Company Company" [...].

<div align="right">Siegmund 2017, 4-5</div>

The performance is based on few words, doubled by movement, gestures, micro-
gestures and microexpressions. As mentioned above, its main language is nonverbal,
but it is employed, more often than not, as commentary on verbal elements. Words are
apparently used to describe what the audience will see (e. g. ballet, waltz, etc.), but
what the viewers are actually presented with consists of tongue-in-cheek, ironic
scenes that challenge the establishment, especially the requirements it imposes in the
field of choreography (first and foremost in ballet), such as excellency, training, out-
standing grace and professionalism. If one does not comply with these rules, the es-
tablishment seems to say, one is not doing ballet. Jérôme Bel seems to disagree. At
least when it comes to the prominence ballet holds among other types of dance. Post-
modern and postdramatic pastiche pave the way for his caustical, yet humorous retort.
Not only do the dancers onstage not follow the strict rules of (in this case) ballet, but
they move with a lot more freedom than this form, competitional *par excellence*,
normally allows. Bel's approach, involving comments on and the challenging of the
classical, obsolete view on what art (not only dance) should be, is a perfect illustra-
tion of discourse-criticism, convention-breaking and metatextualism as traits typical
of contemporary art, especially when it comes to the conceptual art trends. *Gala* is
profoundly countercultural and non-complying. It achieves these qualities by con-
fronting the imperative with the disobedient, the "tell' with the "show", censorship
with freedom, "must" with "want", and it does this *by "not showing" what is "told"*.
In every scene, the aesthetic effect becomes, without failure, obvious in the spectators'
emotional reaction. Verbal and nonverbal cues make the game in *Gala*, while also
revealing its author as a veritable *homo ludens* (Huizinga 1971). Through the inter-
play of words and gestures, the performers write (tell) "Ballet" on blank pages, but
what they do (show) ranges from freestyle dance and walking to jumping and other
types of movement, which, funnily enough, also include, in a few instances, ballet
movements. "Bel's work has been historically important in challenging conventional
restrictions on who dance is by and for" (Maltais-Bayda 2018), and his typically
postmodern and postdramatic take on conventions is unequivocal in *Gala*.

There is a directorial and dramaturgical mechanism that makes this playful piece
accomplished and coherent. *Gala* changes its shape every time it is franchised - as
stated above, the cast is never the same -, but it always sticks to its framework. It is a

worldwide success because its formula is similar to a recipe the main ingredients of which are its concept and structure. It is a success, one might venture to say, because of its dramaturgy.

> Bel's dramaturgy could be called, as British director and head of the theatre group *Forced Entertainment* Tim Etchells has done, a dramaturgy of lists. [...] Its organising principle is the series: a series of ballet moves, a series of waltzes, a series of moonwalks.
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> Siegmund 2017, 6

If the structure of Bel's show is listlike, the concept, explicitly stated in the title, relies on the idea that dance is a celebration. I regard *Gala* as an instance of conceptual choreography, a sample of writing - with and beyond the body, and it is to this type of discourse that Bel's performance should be ascribed. *Gala* tells us that the world is a beautiful place, and, given the right idea, it can be remade with every new generation of humans, just as *Gala* is restaged with a different cast every time.

Should the "tell" versus "show" mechanism I consider Bel's piece to be based on in more than one instance need further clarification, light can be shed on this matter in terms of the semiological question of "whether the statement 'corresponds with the facts'" (Austin 1962). In *Gala*, it mostly does not, and Bel's endeavour can be translated semiotically as antiphrastic: the concept "tweaks" the literal (Alighieri 1990, 2:1) meaning of words. As noted above, the statement (e. g. "Ballet") hardly corresponds with the facts. Furthermore, if we translate the mechanism *Gala* is based on into the vernacular used by linguists, what happens is that the *signifiant*, as Saussure would put it, becomes the opposite of the *signifié*. This effect cannot be achieved without a code, previously accepted as a convention by both the audience and the author. What sets this dance theatre production apart, among other qualities, is not only that the language - code - used here is *both* verbal and nonverbal, but also the way these languages are interrelated in the economy of the performance. Moreover, Bel's employment of concept and structure in *Gala* as dramaturgical devices, can be regarded not only as a "dramaturgy of lists", but also as one of rearrangements.

A short digression: Unlike fiction books, which focus on language as embodied thought *and* as the writer's material, dance performances focus on the human body as embodied thought, i.e. DNA code, *and* as the artist's material. A comparison between a work of fiction and a sculpture should further clarify the question of the artists' guilds' diversity when it comes to the medium they choose to express themselves. As for the theatre, the main trait of which is syncretism, as it employs as many of the other arts as it needs, it is there, in the theatre, that the ethereal thought-process comes alive biologically - through the actor/performer -, and this is an idea endorsed both by Shakespeare's view that "the world's a stage" (Shakespeare, 1623, 2025 2:7,134) and by Adolphe Appia's view of theatre as "the work of living art" (Appia 1960). Furthermore, if we consider the arts from a bird's-eye-view, we can bear the truism that writers rearrange

words into works of art called novels, stories or poems, while painters rearrange colours. Musicians rearrange musical notes on scores. Since all these can be compared to recipes, I have come to think of *Gala* in the same terms one can think of a reenactment, reinterpretation, *live* performance of Mozart's *Requiem* or of Chopin's *Concerto for Piano no. 1*. Or maybe Beethoven's *9th Symphony*, or Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. Or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The score or play remains the same, the orchestra or cast changes at each new "reading" of the score or play; each interpretation of the same score (music) or part (play) changes in its nuances only, while the notes and words do not. This happens each time a philharmonic or theatre manager decides these works should be in the repertoire. If we further analyse *Gala* in these terms, we can see that the "score", the "play" created by conceptual artist Jérôme Bel is rebuilt with every performance, resembling, in this respect, the project an architect has created for a dome which can be built in more than one place as long as the builders have the blueprint. *Gala* has become a worldwide phenomenon *because* it is a blueprint. At the same time, it has a coherent and intelligent dramatic structure. As Gerald Siegmund states,

> What is most striking about Jérôme Bel's work is the clarity of its structure. [...] With the gesture of the minimalist, Bel reduces the theatre to its bare work, simple actions, very few costumes and props. Nothing is accidental. Everything that appears on stage is essential to the action unfolding. It is arranged in a logical way where one thing follows the other developing like an argument or a train of thought.
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> Siegmund 2017, 6

It becomes even more evident after we have read Siegmund's above-quoted assessment that *Gala*, which is one of the best examples of how to do things with and against words (the "showing" being done *versus*/in opposition to the "telling") is also one of the best examples of good practices in the field of dance theatre stage dramaturgy. It speaks a language we all understand. In Bel's own words: "Dramaturgy is the language of theatre" (Bauer 2010).

3. How to do things with(out?) words - "Show, don't tell!" and the smaller picture of dramaturgy

The idea that dance can reveal anything beyond the word, as proposed by Bel himself (Grigorescu & Popov 2018, 134), cannot stand if we understand the word as Derrida et al. conceived of it: a metaphor for thought, the expression of a mutually-understood unit of a larger code - language. Words, in their literal meaning, are a part of a human's life since their birth and, even if they are used in the theatre, for example, only for backstage tailoring of the concept (i.e. [non]verbal text) of a nonverbal performance, they are indispensable. Any human gene has a meme correspondent (Dawkins 1976; 2006).

Following in the footsteps of Richard Dawkins and other theorists and practitioners quoted in the hereby study, it is my view that both (literal) words and the human body are expressions of an all-encompassing semantical unit[7], which renders meaning both in our daily life and onstage, even when words are not used explicitly. If we take into account the theories of Watzlawick, Jakobson and Derrida, among others, any act that involves the use of a language (even those which are nonverbal *par excellence*) is a carrier of meaning. In the metaphorical acception of words as "codes", seen as parts of an all-encompassing "text", even to show *is* to tell. And when it comes to *Gala*, the written onstage word says "yes/ballet", while the nonverbal onstage reply says "no/dance is for everyone". The audience also replies with laughter as a sign of having, at least partially, decoded the "message".

As mentioned above, Bel's performance relies on a structure that often *shows* the very opposite of what it *tells*. This perspective deconstructs the nonlucrative 'Show' - i.e. "use the implicit - connotative - layers of communication!", 'don't tell' - i.e. "don't use the explicit - denotative - layers of communication!" recipe for creating art. *Gala* involves both the implicit and the explicit layers of verbally and nonverbally coded messages, and, on a dramaturgical level, its main device is the dialogue between these two. As such, it stands as a witness for the reality that "Show, don't tell!" can no longer be the gospel of the twenty-first-century artist.

Since one cannot do things without words, one cannot not tell.

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[7] see supra, "logos";

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