

Sense and Significance in the Art of Dance and in the Choreographic Analysis

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Abstract

The art of dance, often considered a universal language, is actually much more complex and cannot be reduced to just a simple form of communication. Although dance uses body movements to convey messages, these movements are deeply rooted in the cultural, social and historical context of those who practice and perform them. Thus, dance is not a universal language in the strict sense of the word, as the meanings of movements can vary considerably between different cultures and societies. This article explores the importance of cultural context in the presentation and interpretation of dance and the particularities that the dancer's body presents, arguing for a multidimensional approach to choreography analysis.

Keywords: non-verbal language, dance, ballet, semiotics, Western culture, art of dance, art of choreography.

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Dance is a body language and a form of non-verbal communication through which people express their emotions, thoughts and physical states. This communication is achieved through a combination of signals transmitted through posture, physiognomy, facial expressions, gestures, gaze and distances. Through these elements, dance manages to convey complex messages without using words, becoming a form of expression deeply linked to the cultural context of each individual.

From the perspective of a **social phenomenon**, the art of dance is not an isolated phenomenon, but the result of a wider social context. Dance is triggered and influenced by a number of social, cultural and historical factors. Choreographers, dancers and spectators are individuals who are part of a society and have a specific historical background. These factors lead them to act according to certain socio-cultural conventions and aesthetic systems. For example, traditional dances may reflect the values, beliefs and practices of a community, and these elements are understood and appreciated by members of that community. Body movement in dance is produced in a specific cultural context and with a specific purpose, and cultural conventions determine the limits and possibilities of expression in dance. In classical Indian dance, there are over 4000 mudras or gestures, through which dancers depict complex actions, emotions and relationships. These gestures are easily understood by Indian audiences because they are integrated into Indian cultural life and traditions. The classical Indian dance known as Bharatanatyam is a perfect example of how cultural conventions determine forms of expression. The mudras used in this dance are coded symbols that describe actions, objects and emotions, each gesture with a specific meaning, recognized and understood by Indian audiences. These mudras are an integral part of Indian education and culture, and are learned and passed down through generations.

We observe how **cultural conventions** play a crucial role in determining the limits and possibilities of expressiveness in dance. Each culture has its own codes and norms that influence how dance is created and perceived. In traditional African dances, the movements are often rhythmic and energetic, reflecting a deep connection with nature and community. In contrast, European forms of dance can be more structured and formal, reflecting different aesthetics and social norms.

In classical European dance, the vocabulary of gestures is much more restricted compared to that of India. Gestures in ballet are often stylized and standardized, being used to express certain emotions or actions in a way that can seem formalized and artificial. The hand over heart gesture can symbolize love or emotion, and a jump can suggest freedom or joy. European classical dance has a much smaller vocabulary of mimetic gestures compared to Indian classical dance, and is also only understood by an informed audience, which considerably limits the expressive range of this dance form.

However, classical ballet has its own charm and elegance and is appreciated for its rigorous technique and aesthetic beauty. Familiar viewers can appreciate the subtleties and intricacies of the art, but to an uninitiated audience the meaning of the gestures may be less obvious.

The art of dance also serves as a **reflection of the cultural and social identity** of a community. Through dance, people can express their belonging to a certain culture, tradition or social group. Folk dances are often associated with specific regions or communities and are used to celebrate important events, mark rites of passage, or express solidarity and collective identity. Therefore, in order to better understand the meanings of the art of dance, it is essential to recognize the cultural, social and historical influences that shape both the dancers' performance and the spectators' understanding. The context in which a dance performance is presented can profoundly influence how it is perceived and understood. A traditional dance presented in a modern setting can take on new meanings and interpretations, reflecting cultural changes and adaptations.

Because dance movements can be closely related to the **gestures of ordinary life**, the emotions they express can be immediately understood, partly through a visual appreciation of the gesture and partly through a kinesthetic response. Let us go back to the emergence of modern dance in Europe and the United States, to **Martha Graham**, whose commitment to dramatic content was so strong that she often referred to her works as dramas. She created a new movement technique to express what she saw as the psychological and social condition of modern man, declaring in interviews that modern life is nervous, sharp and zigzag. and these were some of the aspects she wanted to reproduce through her choreographies.

Even the gestures of ordinary life are inherited from cultural conventions. A smile or a wave of the hand may, in some non-Western cultures, be perceived as a sign of aggression rather than politeness. In the same manner, the way spectators interpret dance movements depends on the context in which those movements occur and on the spectator deciphering them. A fall can mean despair in one context or for one person and, in another context or for another person, a plunge into ecstasy.

Movements and their significance differ from culture to culture, and are not defined in a universal dictionary of movements. In general, movements are related to certain meanings, such as allegories, emotions, frames of mind. The possibility of

having a universal translation of dance movements by associating a translation of signs is difficult because dance movements are determined by a present and past, social, political, economic, cultural context that constantly changes the meaning of the movement.

To better understand why dance cannot be a universal language, we will try to look through the **filter of semiotics** – a discipline that investigates the way communication and meaning work, i.e. the relations between code and message, between sign and discourse.

Semiotics is concerned with the nature and function of language and the processes by which meaning is generated and understood. Semiotic analysis recognizes the position or role of the individual in relation to the notion of fixed or unitary or universal meaning. In the study of semiotics, subjectivity is dynamically engaged in translating the meaning of an image or object. An important observation is that subjectivity is acknowledged as being related to our perception, which makes the reading / interpretation of signs – images, objects or movements –, to be socially conditioned. Central to semiotic analysis is the recognition of how visual and cultural material is encoded, namely the social conventions that link signs to meanings.

If the way the material is encoded is not recognized by the spectator, the translation of the movement will not be identical from one spectator to another, because the social and cultural component of the spectator is highly relevant to how the spectator makes meaning of the movement.

Searching for the meaning of movement is intuitively connected to the image of the body, thus the representation of the body plays a decisive role in the process of *translation* of movement. Weight, dynamics, shapes, proportions, height, hair color, skin color, features, location, etc. affect how the spectator translates the meaning created by the dance movements into words. Body appearance may cause heterosexual spectators to receive one set of responses, homosexual spectators another, lesbian and transgender spectators yet another set of findings, and bisexual spectators may receive yet another set of interpretations. Body features may also have some resonance in one culture versus another, such as dance performances by people of color in front of a *white* audience or in the space of Western culture and vice versa.

Going back to the period of modern dance, choreographers such as **Merce Cunningham** and **George Balanchine** argued that too much concern for dramatic

expression could hinder the development of dance as an art form. Balanchine argued that ballet is such a rich art form that it should not be an illustrator of the most interesting, even the most significant source of inspiration – **literature**. Ballet will speak for itself and about itself, from its point of view. The works of these choreographers emphasized the formal structure and development of choreography rather than that of drama or emotion. Partly as a result of their influence, abstract or plotless ballet became popular among choreographers in the following decades.

We note how the analysis of dance has been largely dominated by the Western cultural perspective. This approach has often generated a one-way analysis, neglecting the complexity and diversity of angles from which **choreography** can be interpreted, especially in the context of globalization and intense cultural interactions. Recently, academic discussions have begun to draw attention to the subjective reading angles of visual languages and the risk of studying visual images from a single perspective.

Western culture has imposed a number of aesthetic norms and values that have influenced the way dance and choreography are analyzed and appreciated. This influence is visible in the criteria for evaluating the dancers' performance, in the emphasis placed on the technique and perfection of the movements, but also in their symbolic interpretation. Western choreographers tend to privilege certain forms of bodily expression, value certain types of narrative, and impose standards of excellence that can be alienating to dancers from other cultures.

This one-way approach to choreography risks simplifying and distorting the complexity of dance's cultural expression. This can lead to an incomplete or erroneous understanding of the meanings and functions of dance in different cultures. Traditional African or Asian dances, which are rich in symbolism and ritualistic meanings, can be reduced to mere aesthetic manifestations when analyzed through the lens of Western aesthetics.

Recently, research has begun to emphasize the importance of the cultural and social context in which a dance performance is presented. This involves recognizing that the **meaning** of a choreographic movement or sequence can vary drastically depending on the context in which it is performed and its viewers. These subjective angles of reading emphasize the need for a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of choreography.

Studying visual images from a single perspective, be it Western or non-Western, runs the risk of ignoring the richness and diversity of possible interpretations. The approach can lead to the exclusion of essential aspects of culture and the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. That is why it is essential to adopt a pluralistic approach that incorporates multiple perspectives and allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the art of dance, and implicitly the art of choreography

Conclusions

Dance is a non-verbal language of social expression, consisting of movements and forms subconsciously associated with various experiences. Although it cannot concretely and fully communicate specific events or ideas, it can express emotions in a direct and powerful way. Due to its non-verbal and culturally specific nature, dance cannot be considered a universal language, but it remains a powerful form of communication of human emotions and states.

Dance, as body language, is a complex and nuanced form of non-verbal communication that incorporates a multitude of cultural signals and symbols. Dance is not only an individual manifestation, but also a social phenomenon that reflects the values, beliefs and traditions of a community. Choreographers, dancers and spectators, influenced by socio-cultural and historical conventions, contribute to the creation and interpretation of the art of dance in a way that goes beyond mere physical movement. That is why dance remains a powerful and universal form of expression of human emotions and identity, even if its meanings vary from one culture to another.

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