

Introduction: Dance as Social Life and Cultural Practice

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Dance occupies an important place in the social structure of all human cultures throughout history. Dance is most commonly defined as a way of human expression through movement. But dance simply cannot be reduced merely to movement. While it is true that movement is indeed a fundamental feature of dance, because dance can also be defined as a specific art movement, based on the expressive moves of the human body, dance is also much more. A number of theoretical definitions of dance define it as a conscious way of rhythmic movements of the body in a defined bounded space, but these either sport-kinesiological or art theories of dance usually overlook many symbolic aspects of dance. In many cases, they reduce dance to its physical component in terms of aesthetically perfected rhythmic physical activity, but they overlook the multiple roles and meanings that dance has for the society in which it appears. The purpose of this anthropology of dance issue is to unfold various meanings and nuances of dance in contemporary societies, with different contributors with different examples from around the (dance) world illustrating how dance can be observed, investigated and theorised in all its variety.

From the anthropological point of view, dance can be defined as a cultural practice and as a social ritual (Radcliffe-Brown 1994), whereby dance is seen as a means of aesthetic pleasure and a means for establishing ties and specific structure in the community. Dance as a social ritual can be considered in the light of the symbolic aspects of a specific culture and in the light of the processes of identification and differentiation through the meanings that it produces for the individuals in this culture.

Dance always bears a specific meaning, which depends on the social setting in which it appears. For example: if in a particular dance a man turns a woman under his arm, in the literal sense, on the denotative level, this body movement conveys a meaning of a dance turn. But on the broader cultural, connotative level, this movement can talk about male domination and female subordination, i.e. about chauvinism and macho patriarchal culture. However, in some other cultures, this movement can be a sign of female superiority and male servility to a woman, which signifies a matriarchal structure of society. Or to illustrate this with another example, in a certain segment of modern Western societies, women's powerful and enthusiastic movement of hips and buttocks is labelled as obscene, excessive and signifying vulgarity and immorality, but this same movement in some other segments of the same society indicates female confidence and self-esteem and serves as a

sign of female emancipation and gender equality. Moreover, this very same hip and buttocks movement in ceremonial ritual dances of some African tribes can bear only the meaning of worship and glorification of woman's uterus and thus of fertility of female being. Such semantic signification of dances is also the reason that nowadays we often characterize some urban, street dances, which emerge as sub-cultural dance styles, as inappropriate or even harmful dances. However, bodily moves, dance figures or even dance styles are not indecent or inappropriate by themselves, but such semantic baggage is always put on them by the society in which they appear.¹

Historically, as Sachs (1997) notes, dance was at all times and in all cultures (from the magic and animism of Palaeolithic man to the indigenous religions of African peoples and tribes; from the ancient civilizations of the East and the ancient societies of medieval Europe to the Western capitalist societies) tightly embedded in the life of a particular society. It was a form of communication and an integral part of the reproduction of the social system. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1994: 4), I can argue that dance as a specific language is a socially-historical phenomenon, dependent on the space and time in which it exists and dependent on the power structures that rule in that time. Dance is a learned cultural practice; Polhemus (1993: 8) says that societies create dances and that dance is actually a 'metaphysics of culture', because a culture of specific society is embodied in the forms of material and physical culture, and the latter is also stylized and schematized in the form of dance.

In this respect, all contributors to this issue study dance from the broader anthropological and cultural studies perspectives and go beyond narrower conceptualizations of dance as mere physical movement. The field of dance studies, from the anthropological perspective, has been growing in recent decades; in this issue, dance is dealt with as a cultural practice and a social life. There is much dancing all around the world. People dance for fun, pleasure, leisure, for money, for their jobs, for their self-expression, for the sake of tradition, for ritual purposes etc. As such, dance should be examined as a part of everyday life, whether in Argentina, India, America, England, Jamaica, Senegal, Tanzania, New Zealand, Russia, Turkey, Slovenia or Australia. Beside the presentation of dance in all these geographical contexts, different questions regarding dance in contemporary societies are also opened in this issue. Contributors examine dance as a part of modern world and investigate various dances and dance-related practices in the context of globalization and some also in the context of the capitalist world market.

In her critical essay, Marta E. Savigliano addresses the questions of queer interests in tango and reflects on queer tango in globalised capitalism. She studies tango as an icon of heteronormative love and takes into consideration queer and regular *milongas* in Buenos Aires to find out how queer tango affects *milonga* culture and how tango intervenes in the formation of queer subjectivities.

¹ Cresswell (2006: 71–73) illustrates this with the case of North American and Latin American dances that entered the British dance halls in the first four decades of the 20th century (e.g. shimmie, tango). These dances – nowadays widely socially accepted – were at that time labelled as dances with entirely inappropriate moves, which could impair the morality of British society. In public discourses of that time one could find labels such as 'degenerated and dirty moves' or they were even described as "primitive, barbaric, eccentric and dissolute" dances.

Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook raises issues regarding urban vernacular movement (dance and quotidian performance) in globalised Turkey at the edge of Europe and deals with multicultural issues of how difference is embodied and politicised in bodily movement in the gap between Istanbul's Islamic and secular cultures.

An investigation of a northern Indian traditional dance, Kathak, in the globalised world is done by Sarah Morelli. She examines how the traditions of teaching this dance and the whole philosophy behind it have changed in modern conditions, due to the radical socio-political changes in India as well as due to the transplantation of this dance to America and its popularisation.

A similar case study of the transplantation of the Caribbean dances and culture to the British area is done by Sherrill Dodds, although she makes even a step further when asks a question how the Caribbean migrants in London identify with music and dance from their Caribbean 'homeland'. These dance-music practices help them to construct themselves as distinct from a dominant white culture.

In a similar manner, Maruša Pušnik and Kristina Sicherl investigate the transplantation of the global dance culture, salsa, to the local Slovenian context. Their interest lies in examining salsa dance as a tool of interpersonal communication and as a global commodified popular culture when exploring the various social functions that salsa can perform in global, individualised, commercialised and highly competitive contemporary societies.

Yet another interesting perspective of contemporary dance practices is opened by Georgiana Gore. She examines a new dance genre, flash mob dance, consisting of a collective dance event organized in public spaces through mobile phone and internet communication. She argues that such dance practices experience rapid global spread in consumer capitalism and effectively reconfigure urban spaces and performance sites.

Andrée Grau turns to another interesting perspective: the marginalization of figure skating, even in its 'ice dancing' incarnation, inside dance studies. In this regard, she opens questions connected to the boundaries between dance and non-dance, to dance hierarchies and discrimination among different dance practices. She illustrates all these dilemmas with a specific case study of Russian skaters who choreographed an 'Australian Aboriginal Dance' for the 2010 European skating championships and Olympics.

From the perspective of decolonizing theory Ojeya Cruz Banks explores the cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement of two dance cultures, Maori dance as done by the Atamira Dance Collective in New Zealand and Sabar dance in Senegal. Her argument is that from a non-Western-centric perspective and from an auto-ethnographical experience of dancing with people one can explore their perception of dance that might be radically different from the Western-oriented dance studies.

In the same geographical context, Africa, and from the same theoretical stance (a decolonizing perspective), Anne Leseth does research on the colonisation of body practices and of how body practices reflect and shape the political contexts and purposes within which they occur. She studies dance and sports in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and argues that different dance societies are evidence that colonisation was not a straightforward process in which people responded without resisting.

References

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