MOVEMENT AND MEANING: DANCE IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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THE PRESENT NEED FOR WORDS AND RESEARCH

Although "dance" is a social fact, I assume that it is derived from species-specific capacities, and that it is therefore part of the human constitution and a basic force in social life, and not merely the consequence of human invention at some particular time and place (Blacking, 1976). Its evolutionary importance as a mode of communication is borne out by the fact that it has not been superseded by verbal language, although clearly verbal language is generally more efficient for cultural adaptation. The universality and survival of "dance" suggest that it cannot be abandoned without danger to the human species; that it must be practised by all; and that its evolutionary value lies in its effectiveness as a mode of *non*-verbal communication.

I have put "dance" in inverted commas in the opening paragraph, in order to emphasise that although dance analysts may have a broader concept of dance than dancers, it remains essentially ethnocentric or culture-specific, and is based on the common-sense concepts of dance prevalent in Euro-American cultures. We do not really know what "dance" is as a general human phenomenon. If, like ritualisation behaviour, it is a species-specific, modelling system, it could be expressed in social forms other than those usually recognised as dance. Or it could be an interlanguage with which people encode strategic intentions specifically into movements that differ from their movements in non-dance contexts (cf. Gell, 1979: 29). Henceforth, the inverted commas will be omitted.

What, then, is the value of dance criticism and scholarship, of words about dance? It seems that they have arisen in response to the need to re-establish the ancient role of dance in education and social life, and that when this goal has been achieved and the nature of dance is properly understood, dance research will wither away and be replaced by more conscious and widespread dance practice. There will be a place for dance criticism, history and sociology, to

89

record the changing patterns and functions of dance in society; but the current division in dance between mental and manual labour will dissolve, as dancers and scholars share each other's activities in a common cause.

As dance developed as an art-form along with the division of labour in industrial societies, so it became increasingly prevented from "speaking" for itself. The verbiage surrounding dance restricts the activities of those who belong to the world of professional dance, because it makes them answerable in words for thoughts and actions that are essentially non-verbal. It also stifles the common-sense knowledge and sensitivities of spectators, because it inhibits their natural capacity to dance and enjoy others' dancing with culture-specific metalanguages that use words and concepts derived from spheres of action other than dance. Thus the possibilities of learning to use fully an important mode of communication are curtailed because its non-verbal characteristics are devalued. David Best has quite rightly pointed out that dance cannot educate people to think verbally, but this does not rule out the possibility of thinking non-verbally.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest how and why a verbal, social anthropological approach to dance can resolve some of the contradictions inherent in the present phase of the history of dance, to which dance criticism and scholarship belong as much as the creations of choreographers. Ideally, interpretation should be possible without words; but if words have been used to create and reinforce attitudes that close people's minds to the possibility of developing skills and experience in non-verbal communication, words may also be most effective in helping to re-open those minds by contesting the verbal arguments and false interpretations of experience that closed them. Certainly no one will be impressed with the attitude of a dancer who says "I cannot *tell* you. I can only *show* you. I must dance it". And yet, as Peter Brinson has pointed out, "the inner world of the dancer" must be of concern to the understanding and practice of dance, and a dancer is quite right to insist that what is most important about dance, as a special kind of social activity, is what it communicates without words.

The problem of relating movement to meaning has encouraged some dance scholars to look for models from the analysis of speech, in which useful distinctions have been made between code and message, signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, and so on. As "a

90

system of signs that express ideas", the code of a verbal language can operate independently of its meaning: but not all linguists accept the independence of code and message, and many workers have striven to relate more closely syntactic and semantic structures, on the grounds that speakers' intentions to mean something are the deep structures of their speech.

The work of socio-linguists and discourse analysts tends to reinforce the earlier arguments of Malinowski and anthropologists who demonstrated that the meaning of languages can be fully understood only in the context of use. Small variations of emphasis, intonation, word order, and even direction of speech, as well as paralanguage (e.g. nonverbal cues), are not a part of the word grammar, but they can convey shifts of meaning that are no less significant than the changes achieved by changes of syntax. This evidence does not conflict with the view that verbal language is biologically based and species-specific (cf. Lenneberg 1967), but it does require refinement of the extreme position of the trans-formational grammarians who followed up the brilliant work of Noam Chomsky. That is, we may accept that people inherit some of the cognitive capacities necessary for speech, but speech is not necessarily controlled by the template of "deep structures"; nor is it unsystematic or a mere epiphenomenon of social situations. The critics of transformational grammar seem to be claiming that there is a closer correlation between code and message than was originally envisaged, and that when we take into account *all* the signs that are systematically used in speech, the structure of the idea expressed is not too far removed from the structure of its expression. What sustained the notion that code and message were independent was too much emphasis on the analysis of products rather than the processes by which they were constructed.

The successes and the breadth of linguistic research undoubtedly provide a source of inspiration and a variety of models (see Kaeppler 1978, especially pp. 43–45), and the most recent work promises to throw more light on the relationships between language structures and the expression of ideas. But just as the methodologies of linguistics, biology, physics and chemistry have grown out of the objects of study, so it seems to be a policy of defeat not to pursue the methodological implications that are inherent in the nature of dance.

A decision to develop a discipline that is separate and different

91

from linguistics does not mean that the words of daily discourse cannot be used, or that a special metalanguage must be developed for the study of dance. On the contrary, dance as a human phenomenon cannot be properly understood outside the contexts of use and the conceptual worlds of its users. This requires that dance be studied cross-culturally *through the everyday "languages" of different cultures*. "Western" theories of dance, such as those of Rudolf Laban or Alan Lomax, can be taken as guides to the sorts of problem that may be found and the questions that should be asked. But they are only ethno-theories that must be considered equally along with other peoples' ethno-theories.

The methodological problem is not to test, say, Laban's theories of dance and movement in relation to dance practice, treatises on Indian and Chinese dance, and the ethno-theories that can be discovered by empirical research in different societies. It is, rather, to take Laban's theories, the *Bharata Natya Sastra*, and many other contrasting theories and bodies of data, and to try and develop a general theory of dance which takes into account the variety of interpretations of the concept and of dance styles and experience.

The problem then, is to disperse the fog of words that conceals the realities of dance without denying the value of words in revealing the true nature of dance; to demystify dance attitudes without destroying the mystery of dance; and to develop a scientific study of dance that does not become separated from the subject of enquiry nor become an end in itself.

We should not be asking the question, What is dance? But rather, *Who* dances? Who appreciates dance, and how, and why? When pressed to talk about dance and dance experience, and to try and explain its meaning, people who are accustomed only to dance can be quite articulate about their feelings. The language and metaphors that they use, and the analogies that they draw, may ultimately be more scientific than any "objective" analyses of their movements. Films, videotapes, and various notations such as Laban and Benesh are all useful tools for referring to the object of study, and could become more important in creating dances; but they cannot describe or explain what is happening as human experience (see Gell, 1979: 26–27). There is no doubt about the importance and value of notation as a record of movement and as a source for study, but there are real dangers that analyses of written scores, as in music (see Blacking, 1981), can lead to all kinds of semiotic extravaganzas

92

if they are not related to the intentions and experiences of choreographers, performers, and spectators in the appropriate social contexts.

Dance, as a topic of scientific study, is ultimately about action and conscious human intentions. The processes of moving and giving meaning to movement are the source of dance experience, of which the dance product is but the visible sign. There can, of course, be unintended consequences of actions, and people can have difficulty in verbalising their intentions. But this does not give dance scholars a licence to invoke explanations of movement sequences and dance motivation in terms of the unconscious or subconscious. When people talk about "being danced" or claim that their movements are directed by internal or external "forces", they are obviously not describing unconscious states; nor are they necessarily reporting altered states of consciousness. They are trying to describe a non-verbal mode of discourse, whose logic and forms can be precisely expressed and understood, but not always clearly articulated in words.

Instead of invoking the subconscious to explain dance experiences and the performance of patterns of movement whose logic seems to defy verbal description, even by participants, we should recognise that there are coherent, structured languages of dance, and that the transfer from verbal to non-verbal discourse constitutes the core of the dance experience. It is not that people abandon reason for emotion when they dance, but that they often introduce another kind of argument, whose grammar and content are most effectively, though not exclusively, expressed in non-verbal language.

FORM AND FEELING

Most discussions of dance, as about other non-verbal languages such as music, seem to revolve around two issues:
1. Is dance primarily a system of signs that are given meanings in social contexts? *or*
2. Is dance primarily a language of emotions, a formalised expression of feelings that are organised in order to have wider and greater effects on human action?

Few would deny that both elements are necessary, that form without feeling is sterile and feeling without form is unlikely to be socially effective; but aesthetic and philosophical discussions

93

generally assign greater value to one or the other element, and this must be very confusing for professional dancers. Dance scholars can help dancers to resolve these contradictions, not by joining battle and supporting one or the other view, but by asking why these arguments should have arisen at all, how they have been carried on in different social and dance contexts, and whether they reveal anything useful about dance, as distinct from the attitudes to dance of different individuals and social groups. For example the treatment of dance as primarily a system of signs has been justified on the grounds that the range of human feelings has been much the same through history and around the world, but the variety of dance forms constitutes a major human achievement, distinguishes dance from other activities, and makes it worthy of consideration in its own right.

Interpretations of dance forms range between extremes of absolutism and relativism, and of viewing dance as an action autonomous to treating it as an epiphenomenon of social life. What is rarely explained in anything but subjective or vague terms is why, from an absolutist standpoint, some dance forms should be judged more complex or better than others; or, from a relativist standpoint, how exactly dance forms reflect or convey meaning about social life, unless they are specifically mimetic – and even their mimetic significance depends on social convention and the intentions of the dancers. The inconsistencies of formal analyses and assessments are revealed when writers and critics have to include feeling and extrinsic content in their discussions, when they complain that a brilliant technical display has no emotional content, or that a beautiful feeling has been sloppily expressed in movement. Dancers cannot ignore such contradictory judgments, because words influence the reception of audiences, and consequently the sale of tickets. Besides, the demands of spectators, who expect to be excited by virtuosity and moved by the intensity of expression, have influenced the development of dance forms as much as the creativity of choreographers.

Technical virtuosity and depth of expression are not incompatible or contradictory if they are conceived as complementary processes. Moreover, they can produce visibly "simple" or "complex" movements. If dance is a system of signs that express feelings, the resolution of contradictory approaches and interpretations can be achieved by finding more efficient ways of relating movement to

94

meaning. We need ways of describing the signs of dance which can also relate them to their emotional impact.

I suggest that the first step is to clarify the concept of feeling. Dance is a social institution and no matter how individual the inner world of a dancer may be, feelings are culturally encoded as soon as they are brought into action as dance. Some anthropologists go so far as to say that "without the guiding patterns of human culture . . . man would quite literally not know how to feel" (Geertz, 1964: 47). Geertz refers, I think, to what Susanne Langer called "a life of feeling" (Langer, 1953: 372), and in a later context he wrote:

> In order to make up our minds we must know how to feel about things; and to know how we feel about things we need the public images of sentiment that only ritual, myth, and art can provide.   [Geertz, 1975: 82]

It is important to treat feeling, like thinking, as a rational function (cf. Witkin, 1976); to recognise that "emotion is essentially a purposive, creative state" that "raises, transforms, and symbolises" (Hillman, 1970); to avoid drawing distinctions between the emotional and the cognitive; and, above all, to remember that the feelings which people express or receive through the medium of dance are drawn from a repertoire of collective sentiments as much as from personal experience, and that people learn ways of talking about feelings as well as discover ways of acting them out.

This does not rule out the possibility that there are feelings which are unique to dance and a consequence of the physical actions of dancing, or that there are what Manfred Clynes (1977) has called "essentic forms", which transcend cultural boundaries. Nor does it deny the importance of individual choice and imagination. Culture is not a template that controls people's thoughts and patterns of action; it is rather available knowledge that is invoked and constantly re-invented in the course of social interaction. The value of a social anthropological approach to the relationships between form and feeling is that is allows for coherent analyses of dances in relation to their meaning by showing that both forms of dance and the expression of feelings are social facts, and that they are given different sets of meanings in different cultural and social contexts. The structures of dances and the purposes to which they are put must therefore be analysed in context, together with dancers' and spectators' notions of what they are doing, what they experience, and how they make sense of it.

95

TOWARDS A DANCE SCIENCE, PURE AND APPLIED

The absence of a concept of dance in many societies compels dance researchers to be careful about applying their own notions of dance and analytical techniques for what *they* think is dance to what they regard as the dance of other people.

In describing the movements and textures that we observe, we are reporting *behaviour* in much the same way that ethologists and social psychologists describe the movements of animals or people passing each other at pedestrian crossings. We are *not* describing *action*, unless we also enquire what people mean by their movements.

Even if we learn to perform dances to the satisfaction of members of an alien society, we cannot be sure that we understand them in the same way, because our bodies have been brought up in different environments, with different gestures and postures, so that we will even feel the same movements differently, and probably use slightly different muscles to achieve what appear to be the same results.

Morphological analyses of dances tend to be studies of behaviour and inferred meaning, even when accompanied by analyses of social context and the social backgrounds and relationships of the dancers. Detailed sociological data may help to explain the uses of dances; but without further information from participants about how, when and why they decided to perform or respond to particular move-ments, it is insufficient for an understanding of dance as social action. My own analysis of Venda dances (Blacking, 1977), which were filmed and eventually recorded by a trained notator, is deficient in this respect because I analysed meaning at the level of each dance as a whole. I did not ask people how they construed different sequences of movement or what were their intentions in doing them.

The explanation of the meaning of movements is as important for their description as it is for analysing the uses of dance in society, because it is the meaning of movements in context which must guide our identification of significant units. Dance researchers cannot simply apply parameters and units of analysis that have been found useful in one ethnic tradition to their analyses of other traditions, on the grounds that this kind of comparative study will bring closer the scientific understanding of dance as a possible universal human phenomenon. Such procedures may help them to understand more clearly dance in their own societies, as indeed social anthropological

96

fieldwork and theory can be self-analysis as much as analysis of others. But the first step towards developing a science of dance must be to accept the methodological equivalence of all available ethno-theories of dance, no matter how inadequate some may seem to be.

Our chief concern must be with dance processes rather than content, and ultimately the effects of dance as dance depend on people's sensitivity to it as a mode of non-verbal communication. A science of dance must be a science of the conditions of content, the process by which content is formulated (cf. Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler, quoted in Hawkes, 1977). In this process, spectators and critics are performers no less than dancers, just as readers participate in the works they read and each reading adds to the work.

In the analysis of dance processes, words are necessary if knowledge and understanding of dance are to be more than dogma and assertion. Because of the multiple meanings assigned to dance in performance, and the multiple conceptions of dance in different societies, much that is said has more to do with morals, politics, religion, or mental and physical health, than with dance. The problem is to find out which features of *dance* attract people's attention in their quest for meaning, and are therefore most peculiar to dance, and how, in each case, the dance is formulated and understood.

The present state of dance is not unlike that of World Religions. Some practitioners believe that they have the key to all knowledge, while others claim that they have one of several solutions. Because dance is a human phenomenon, it will be impossible to achieve comprehensive knowledge in the context of one cultural and academic tradition, as has seemed possible in research in the natural sciences. Thus, if European dance scholarship and criticism is to progress and become scientific, its first task is to become less ethnocentric in outlook.

What is of special interest to social anthropologists is the possibility that dance is a special kind of social activity that cannot be reduced to anything else, and that invocation of its symbols can communicate and generate certain kinds of experience that can be had in no other way. Dance may be enacted in the service of conservative and oppressive institutions, but the bodily experience of performance can also stimulate the imagination and help to bring new coherence to the sensuous life, which in turn could affect

97

motivation, commitment, and decision-making in other spheres of social life.

If dance played a key role in human evolution and is species-specific, it can always be used to regenerate social life and to enable people to recover the ownership of their senses. If dance research can reveal the relationships between movement and meaning, and help to eliminate the artificial barriers that have been created between mind and body, dance and ethnic dance, "artist" and "layman", technique and expression, it might be able to show how changes of movement can bring about changes of feeling, and so educate the emotions more appropriately for the problems of life in the twenty-first century.

But such a vision of the future is possible in an advanced industrial society only if people ensure that the division of labour necessary for modern technology is not replicated in the arts. As Margaret H'Doubler wrote in 1940:

> *[If dance] is to help in the development of a more general appreciation of human art values, it must be considered educationally [as indeed it was in many African societies, and still is]. The future of dance as a democratic art activity rests with our educational system . . . Only when dance is communally conceived can it exert a cultural influence.* [H'Doubler, 1957: x–xi]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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