
Power and the Dancing Body

cal and amoral. It fragments and diminishes the experience of the work, for artworks are made and judged in a world that is moral, social, and cognitive.

We are witnessing a shift in critical values during the present period. An “anxiety of evaluation” has manifested itself in American criticism in many ways over the past thirty years or so—from an insistence on pure description to debates about cultural relativism. Even the growing emphasis on the political dimension of evaluation noted above is linked to an anxiety of aesthetic evaluation when artists and critics themselves challenge the “right” of the critic to judge a work created by someone outside of her “race”/ethnicity/class/gender/etc. This anxiety now deserves to be put to rest. Although evaluation should not be the only function the critic performs, it is a valuable and crucial aspect of the critic’s work. If evaluation causes anxiety, it is, nevertheless, unavoidable.

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Dancing Bodies Change the World

Dance historians often start from the premise that dance *reflects* society. For instance, in *Time and the Dancing Image*, Deborah Jowitt writes:

Western theatrical dancing . . . has always been *responsive* to current trends. At its most profound, like the other arts, it *reflects* aspects of the current world picture; at its most superficial, it acknowledges the current fashions. . . . The dancer’s image has been subject to many alterations since the beginning of the nineteenth century *in response* to the immense social, political, scientific, and technological upheavals that have characterized the period. . . . Trying to view the dancers of the past as *products* of their age . . . is a challenge [italics added].¹

For Jowitt, dancing and dancers do not produce culture, but are products of it. Dancing and dancers reflect intellectual and material trends in other spheres of human activity; they do not catalyze trends.

Similarly, on a panel on American bodies and American culture in the mid-1980s, I insisted that the physical body reflects the social/political body. I used a binary model — influenced by the anthropologist Mary Douglas — that contrasted smooth versus shaggy body styles as symptoms of tightly versus loosely controlled cultural styles. And I argued that the smooth, controlled, virtuosic bodily images purveyed through various strata of both black and white dance cultures in the eighties (from the heroine and the breakdancers in *Flashdance* to Michael Jackson to the avant-garde choreographer Molissa Fenley) were metaphors for a “greed and glitter” era that stood in direct contrast to the hot effervescence and improvisation of sixties and early seventies dance styles (from James Brown to the twist to the postmodern group the Grand Union).²

The presupposition-assumed by reflection-theory dance historians is that, whether on stage or in social life, dance is a mirror or a microcosm where the workings of culture, everyday life, and even government are actively registered from above on passive bodies below. In a variation of this notion of cultural modeling, Sally Peters writes that “the roots of [exhibition] ballroom dance are popular and mirror views of male/female relations specific to period or culture,” even though she sees this as “ironic since performance requires artistic collaboration, not mere submission as may occur in social dance.”³ Thus, for Peters, a double reflection takes place in the theatricalized arena of exhibition ballroom dancing, for the gendered roles that society has inscribed on bodies on the mass level “trickle up” to the level of artistic choreography.

However, I want now to advance another view of the role of dance in society. I do not want to deny that dancing bodies may at times reflect the way things are, but I want to emphasize that they *also* have the potential to effect change.⁴ While we might easily acknowledge that ritual dancing in traditional societies alters reality (or at least is believed to by the faithful), we tend to diminish the efficaciousness of both theatrical and social dancing in modern Western culture. Yet even the standard dance history books supply proof that Western theatrical dancing has the capacity to change the world.

For instance, Catherine de Medici’s court spectacles were not merely the expression or reflection, but the very medium of political negotiations. Queen Catherine’s ballets were part of political life, and they were usually conciliatory, uniting opposing political and/or religious factions. But Lincoln Kirstein suggests that the Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the civil war in France that ensued from it were, in part, the results of some bad casting choices in *The Defense of Paradise*. In other words, a political error in arranging the ballet led to massive bloodshed. The reconciliation backfired. The event in question was an allegorical combat ballet staged for the Navarre-Valois wedding magnificences, in which Catherine’s son Charles IX, the Catholic king of France and brother to the bride, defended Heaven,

aided by his royal brothers, while the Protestant bridegroom, Henry of Navarre, guarded Hell and led his forces in an attack — doomed to fail, of course — on Heaven. Kirstein asserts that the tenuous peace between Catholics and Protestants was shattered by their symbolic combat in this ballet when violence erupted a few days later in the form of an assassination attempt on Admiral Coligny, the leader of the Huguenots, by a retainer of the Duc de Guise. The St. Bartholomew’s massacre was the royal response to the panic.⁵

Jowitt herself points out that both *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* were cautionary tales for the nineteenth-century Russian imperial court. Like the literary genre of eighteenth-century French fairy tales that included *The Sleeping Beauty*, these ballets didn’t merely reflect, but actually formed — through ethical instruction — a class of courtiers in proper behavior. “The story,” Jowitt writes of Petipa’s masterpiece, “has a moral: a breach in royal courtesy, even to such nasty adversaries as wicked fairies, can allow chaos to upset the orderly flow of events.”⁶

Numerous dance historians have pointed out the deleterious effect of nineteenth-century minstrelsy on the moral fiber of American life. Vicious racist stereotypes of African-Americans took the form of both verbal and physical “humor” on both the white and the black minstrel stage, in ways that still pervade popular culture, not only in the United States but in Europe and Japan as well. In this case, too, it seems that dancing not only reflected racist attitudes already present in the culture, but actually helped to form prejudice, with images of shuffling, lazy clowns and overdressed, shifty dandies.⁷

In an example from our own century, Natalia Roslavleva writes that the dance practices of Isadora Duncan as taught in the Soviet Union in the 1920s eventually entered the public school curriculum in the form of “artistic gymnastics” sports events. The system as it was developed in the Soviet Union after 1947 was based on Duncan “plastique,” and Roslavleva attributes the expressive style of Soviet champion gymnasts, like Olga Korbut, to the influence of Duncan’s technique.⁸ In other words, Duncan’s way of dancing formed the everyday practices — indeed, the bodies — of recent generations of Soviet youth.

“Your Body Is a Battleground”

The contemporary body has become a battleground not only in the struggle in the public sphere over abortion rights but also in scholarly debates on cultural theory.⁹ Cultural historians working from a feminist Foucauldian perspective arrive at a similar position to that of the reflection-theory dance historians when they argue that culture wreaks utter tyranny on individual bodies. Bodies, they claim, are disciplined, molded, and rearranged by dominant powers, which simultaneously promote the illusion that people

are “free” to construct their own bodies — in the matter of shape, say — as they wish. For instance, Susan Bordo writes that:

Popular culture does not apply any brakes to these fantasies of rearrangement and self-transformation. . . . Of course, the rhetoric of choice and self-determination and the breezy analogies comparing cosmetic surgery to fashion accessorizing are deeply mystifying. . . . The general tyranny of fashion — perpetual, elusive, and instructing the female body in a pedagogy of personal inadequacy and lack — is a powerful discipline for the normalization of *all* women in this culture.¹⁰

Now, Bordo insists on the power of culture over the body not because she subscribes to a view of the arts as imitative. Rather, she has entered into a dialectical relationship with two other current theories of the body in contemporary culture. The first is that of postmodern theorists, like Susan Rubin Suleiman, who celebrate the body as protean, capable of slipping out of any fixed role or “voice,” entering instead into a flux of “endless complication and creative movement.”¹¹ The second is that of cultural studies theorists, like John Fiske, who celebrate the body as a “site of resistance” where ordinary people — those who have no political power — become empowered, creating their own social identities by manipulating and reworking the oppressive body images produced by the dominant ideology. Writing about Madonna, for instance, Fiske states that the star is not “an agent of patriarchal hegemony,” as her stereotyped gender role-playing (especially in terms of her subordination to male sexual fantasy) might suggest. Rather, she empowers her primary audience, young girls, supplying “gaps or spaces in her image [of physical and sexual pleasure] that escape ideological control and allow her audiences to make meanings that connect with *their* social experience.”¹² Bordo challenges Fiske’s claim, pointing out that Madonna once seemed to embrace the unruliness of her own rounded physique, but now, thinner and more muscular as the result of an exacting exercise regimen, has simply traded a fifties ideal of voluptuousness for an eighties/mineties ideal of taut control.¹³

Are we, as material persons, thoroughly victimized by or thoroughly resistant to our culture? It seems to me that both positions are too extreme. To deny agency altogether doesn’t square with the range of choices people do seem to exercise (even within certain strictures of “race,” class, gender, age, and so on).¹⁴ After all, to take only one example, transvestites, the exemplary corporeal chameleons, come in all colors, ages, and income brackets (not to mention genders). But at the same time there *are*, undeniably, limits to agency regarding our bodies. These are stringently, if not forcibly, imposed on our bodies by a range of rules: laws, medical regimes, moral codes, etiquette, fashion, and local community or family ethos. In the United States, for instance, our national policy is that smoking is unhealthy. In certain places it is illegal, and in other places it is as morally repugnant as

spitting in public was to our grandparents. To take another example, unless one is Michael Jackson, with no ceiling on one’s cosmetic surgery and bleach budget, it is very unlikely that one can easily change from looking black to looking white. In fact, for some, like Jackson’s brother Jermaine, to make that change might be physically possible, but morally reprehensible. It seems that the relationship between bodies and culture, like that between bodies and nature, occupies a middle ground between discipline and creative expression. That is, we *can* make our own bodies, but only to a limited extent.¹⁵

Bodies Are Ensembles of Social Meaning

To study dance history in a way that breaks out of our field’s often myopic condition means to study not only the bundle of arts that enter into an artistic dance production — music, scene and costume design, lighting, and so on — but also an interdisciplinary ensemble of social practices. And here the debates in cultural studies on the body should be instructive. We should be asking questions about bodies and power. And that requires taking into account the various powers that restrict or release physicality.

Can we do research on either social dancing or ballet without taking into account the kinds of bodily codes Norbert Elias traces in his *History of Manners: The Civilizing Process*?¹⁶ For dancing is part and parcel of everyday social life and, if not usually highly regulated by society in our own day, has in past times figured prominently in the basic training of manners, especially at court (and the court’s equivalent in democratic societies, like Washington society). Ballet emerged in the courts of Europe in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, not only as a symbolic theatrical enactment of royal power, but as part of a package of physical discipline in daily life for the noble classes. To this day it remains the upper-middle-class method for training daughters in proper carriage and deportment. To study the history of manners, then, is to learn what has been both acceptable and possible in dancing events — in regard to, for instance, proximity of partners’ bodies, individual posture, positions of the limbs, eating, drinking, clothing, odors, sexual expression, and so on. As well, dancing has begun to be studied as one of the *channels* for, not just the repository of, the pedagogy of etiquette.¹⁷ Did the waltz, for instance, reflect or actually *alter* the acceptable distance between male and female bodies in public? Did Elvis Presley’s hip swivels (derived from black dance) change the way white youth in the fifties and early sixties stood and carried themselves? Even more than in the macropolitics of states and governments, dance plays an active role in the micropolitics of how persons interact as bodies.

Medical studies shed light on dance events. Elizabeth Aldrich’s compilation of texts on nineteenth-century ballroom dancing includes advice on avoiding wearing poisonous lead-based makeup to social events.¹⁸ What

is considered safe or unsafe in terms of contemporary ballet dancers' body weight has already entered the discourse of the dance field, although dance historians have not rushed to find such information for earlier periods.¹⁹ In studies of the effect of breakdancing spins on the head and spinal cord or of aerobic dancing on heart rates, the dancing body is the subject, not just the reflection, of medical discourse that reaches beyond dance itself. In lore about the physical dangers of dancing, the cultural struggle over the way bodies erupt out of control becomes clear.

We need to study legal codes when issues of licensing affect dance performances, whether in legitimate theaters, burlesque houses, or in shopping malls. How much of the dancing body must be covered in public, whether in the theater or at a social dance gathering is sometimes simply an issue of fashion but at times becomes a legal issue — as in the case of the New York law that until the late 1960s forbade total nudity for moving, but not still, bodies onstage. Where and when are certain kinds of dancing criminalized? Religious codes, like those of the Puritans, shape and are shaped by the dancing body. For the dancing body's energy is dangerously sexual and uncontrollable.

Practices of everyday life, like fashion, furniture, and even architecture affect and are affected by dancers' bodies and dance designs. We know that Marie Taglioni's hairstyle was imitated all over Europe in the 1830s and that the fashion designer Paul Poiret dressed Paris society in colors and patterns borrowed from Bakst's costumes for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Loïe Fuller's wavelike draperies gave organic shape to all sorts of art nouveau craft items, as well as to the building in which she performed at the Paris Exhibition of 1900. In the 1980s, the torn off-the-shoulder sweat-shirt Jennifer Beals wore as an aspiring ballerina in *Flashdance* became de rigueur attire for American girls and young women.

Social Bodies Are Dancing Bodies

This paper, then, is a call for dance historians to note and analyze how dance not only reproduces, but actually produces cultural practices outside of the dance world itself. It is also a call for cultural historians to acknowledge dance as a vital, active element of society when they write their histories of bodies. Perhaps the Choreographing History conference is a step in that direction.

A recent article by Tim Armstrong in the journal *Textual Practice* serves as an example of how dance's role in forming the culture is often overlooked. Armstrong's fascinating article is entitled "The electrification of the body at the turn of the century." In it, he considers the complex cultural attitudes toward the uses, at the end of the nineteenth century, of this new resource in relation to the body: its repressive role in state executions as well as its productive energy for technology that promoted scientific

research and increased the production and consumption of goods. Electricity began to serve as a rich store of metaphoric language for representing the body, in particular the nervous system and sexual desire. In his analysis of images of electricity and the body in Theodore Dreiser's novels, Armstrong even shows how in *Sister Carrie* the new language of electrification was used metaphorically in the theater (Carrie "electrifies" her audience, and her name goes up "in lights").²⁰

Armstrong is interested primarily in what literature has to say about these aspects of electricity and the body, but to a dance historian there is a notable gap in his cultural survey. For dance participated conspicuously in that cultural obsession with electrification, from Loïe Fuller's patented lighting designs (some created in collaboration with the Curies) to Isadora Duncan's and Genevieve Stebbins's theories of human movement as analogous to electrical currents.²¹

I would like to close with a final, more extended example of the role dance plays in producing culture by considering the wedding dance. Of course, the wedding dance plays an important role in European theatrical dancing; it is a theme that deserves an analysis too lengthy to take on here.²² Also, the differences between wedding dances in different ethnic cultures would be useful to analyze but impossible to do here. Rather, I want to talk about the implicit and explicit normative rules of dancing in mainstream Euro-American culture.

According to Emily Post, the set order in which the dancing partners at the reception pair off is as follows: first the bride and groom dance together. Next the bride dances with her father-in-law and the groom with his mother-in-law, while the remaining parents (the groom's mother and the bride's father) dance together. Finally each dances with his or her own parent (of the opposite sex, of course), while the other two parents — the groom's father and the bride's mother — pair up.

The structure of this choreography is as finely tuned in terms of hierarchy and social relations as a court or military ball. The bride and groom are king and queen, leading out the assembly. And although they are more likely to dance a version of the foxtrot or two-step than a cotillion step, in fact the choreographed switching of partners in the foursome closely resembles a cotillion or quadrille. There is a narrative here of political unification, the incorporation of two opposing groups — two families — into a harmonious social body. Generations are joined, split up, and re-allied in the literal performance of kinship structures. The dance doesn't stand for or reflect these relations, but enacts, encodes, and ratifies them in a legal and often religious context.

At many American weddings, not just Jewish ones, after a period of couple dancing by the majority of those assembled, the pairs dissolve into a large group hora. Thus the narrative has a second chapter: the nesting of the individual in the nuclear family is itself nested in the larger community.

The ecstatic line of dancers pulls in stragglers, swallows up those who can't dance — not because it is particularly tolerant, but because it brooks no bystanders. These dances may be symbolic, but they are also meant to do real work — to join families and to enfold the new family into the community.

For dance history to take its place on the stage as a branch of cultural history, dance historians need to show that dancing bodies have not simply created divertissements. Perhaps then cultural historians will be convinced to take seriously the centrality of dance in our culture.

II

The Euro-American Avant-Garde