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“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Cultural Frontiers of Expressive Strands  
in Dance Performances<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

Dance is a widely practiced and appreciated art around the world; a highly rich event that “grows out of culture and feeds back into it” (Fraleigh, "Family Resemblance" 6). Dance scholars in the West, however, have frequently complained about the little interest aestheticians have shown in dance and its complexities compared to other arts (Cohen, "A Prolegomenon" 26; McFee, Dance, Education and Philosophy 1; Marchianò 20; Redfern 3; Sparshott 4; Thomas, Dance Modernity and Culture 10). It is the case that many philosophical questions on dance art have emerged from other fields of study such as anthropology (Royce; Williams), ethnography (Kealiinohomoku, "An Anthropologist"; Kurath; Sklar), history (Adshead and Layson; Berg; Cohen, Next Week), sociology (Thomas, Dance, Gender and Culture; Thomas, Dance Modernity and Culture; Wolff), education (Laban, Modern Educational Dance; Preston-Dunlop). But the artistic and expressive value of dance have also been considered within philosophy (Fancher and Myers; Goodman; McFee, Understanding Dance; Margolis; Redfern; Van Camp, "Philosophy of Dance"), more specifically, for instance, by phenomenological (Sheets-Johnstone), existentialist (Fraleigh, Dance and the Lived Body), symbolist (Langer; Metheny), and analytic (Sparshott) approaches.

In this paper I take the current choreological perspective of dance as my point of departure. I start by offering a revision of choreological theory, reformulating and expanding its original core concepts and central methodological position. My intention is to incorporate aesthetics into their critical frame and start to raise questions about how dance audiences perceive, engage with and understand dance performances in order to highlight the cultural and personal frontiers of these experiences. I will focus here on dance performed in a theatrical space (not necessarily a proscenium stage) with an artistic intention. I will be referring in particular to audiences' experiences in live situations (rather than recorded performances or notated works). For this purpose, however, I won't enter into a discussion of what constitutes dance art<sup>2</sup>, or of how the term 'dance' is defined across cultures<sup>3</sup>.

**The Choreological Perspective**

Broadly speaking, the term 'choreology' has been used to refer to the scholarship of dance. It has its roots in Rudolf Laban's influential principles of movement at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing dance as a multifaceted domain (Lange, "Anthropology" 108) and dance practices as complex embodied phenomena (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 110), choreological studies aim to synthesize theory and

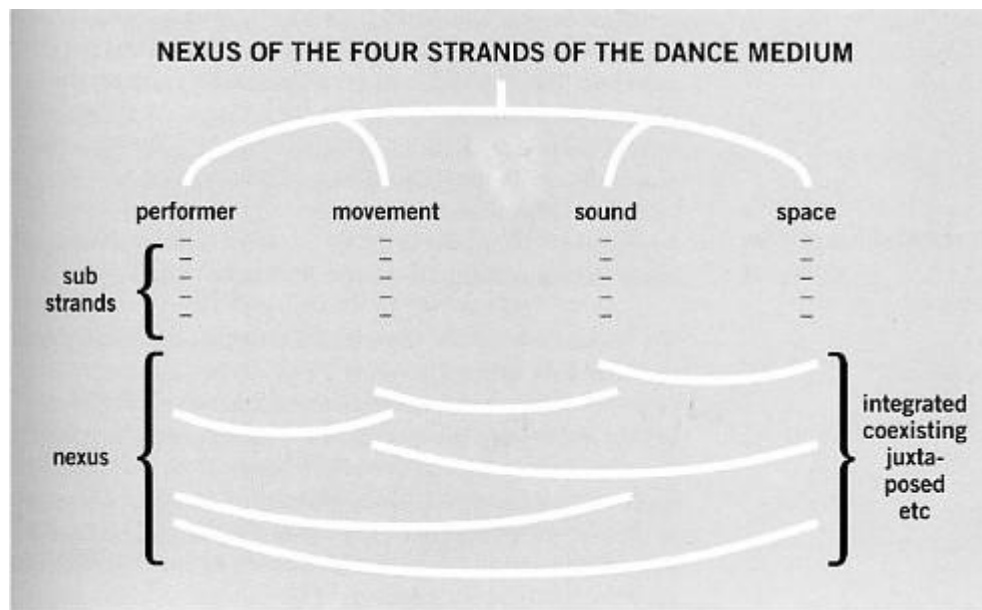
practice in order to establish a way of looking at dance, analyze it, and to develop key terminology that can help us to articulate dance experiences.

I will be examining here specifically the choreological work advanced by Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg who locate dance within the field of theatrical performance (3) in the European tradition (113). Key to their position is giving priority to practical research through experiencing, experimenting, documenting and analysing movement as central to the development of a comprehensive dance theory emerging from within (125).

In this choreological perspective, a tandem methodological approach has been suggested bringing together phenomenology and semiotics of performative art:

“Phenomenology aims to describe happenings, events, subjective experiences focusing on an understanding of the nature of an *initial encounter* with the phenomenon, before cognition and a search for causes takes place. In dance this includes focus on the intuitive subjective experiences of the maker, the performer and the spectator. Semiotics, the study of the signs embodied in performance praxis, looks at how artists create visual, aural and kinetic images of a kind that can be recognised, within a culture, as meaning something” (103)

Choreology main interest resides in the expressiveness of performative movement. More specifically their approach is preoccupied with the processes of creating, performing and appreciating dance art, understanding that this emerges from the combination of three constituents: idea, medium and treatment. On the one hand, the three processes overlap, sometimes becoming a unity and therefore it does not make sense to consider them separately (12), sometimes being ‘cubed’ allowing triadic making, triadic performing and triadic reception, i.e. making, performing and reception during each of those processes. On the other hand, their three constituents interact working towards the shaping of the artist’s ideas in the dance medium. Dance as a performative art is realised in a multistranded medium.



**Figure 1.** Strands of the Dance Medium with Fundamental Nexial Connections (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 43)

The model is constructed as emerging from practice based research and the authors acknowledge the artificiality and problematic conception of the medium and separation

of the strands. The suggestion is therefore to take it as flexible and open to change. In this original configuration, four main distinct strands —performer, movement, sound and space— relate to each other through a web of nexial connections.<sup>5</sup> Each strand with multiple possible substrands (i.e. visual, aural or kinetic items) to be found in them.

For instance, under performer, Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg identify the following broad categories as a starting point: physique, ethnicity, technical ability, personal style, costume, hair, shoes/feet, reification, gender and age (45). Their preference for the label 'performer' rather than 'body' is based on their understanding of the latter as implicating "impersonal physicality" (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 41) which resonates very much with Laban's dualist approach to body/mind issues (Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*)<sup>6</sup>. Substrands of sound include music, noise, words, breath, footwork; movement can be subdivided in gestures, technique, steps, actions; and finally, in space expression is given by sets, lighting, etc. The nexus compose an intricate "web of interrelationships" (41) and play a key role in establishing the cohesion of dance ideas and defining their theatrical treatment. Six types of nexus are proposed as fundamental as shown in figure 1, e.g. performer-movement connection. Nexus can appear, for instance, integrated or closely interlinked as in a ballet performance, coexisting or parallel as in a Cunningham's piece, juxtaposed or not belonging together as in a work by Forsythe. Therefore, by means of these, dance performances display a multi-layered process of signification created through variations in the way connections are established between the strands.

### **A Revision of the Strands of the Medium**

This recent elaboration of the choreological perspective fails to show the real complexity of their main methodological position and concepts. In fact, it misrepresents the choreological view that acknowledges the need for fluidity and expansion of performative dance practice and theory. With its emphasis on four selected strands, binary nexial connections, and uninterested in its applicability to other dance genres and cultural contexts, it regrettably restricts the potential epistemological results from a wider and more flexible framework of reference. Despite those shortcomings, I believe that a revised choreological position could help provide a useful articulation of dance practices.

My first point relates to the movement strand. I would like to argue that movement should be reclaimed as central to a meaningful conception of the art of dance. (Carroll and Banes, "Expression, Rhythm and Dance" 21; Laban, *Modern Educational Dance* 108; Van Camp, "Non-Verbal Metaphor" 179). In fact, human movement has been generally identified itself as the medium of dance (Best 159; Cohen, "A Prolegomenon" 20; Lange, "The Nature of Dance" 10; Redfern 115; McFee, *Understanding Dance* 222)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, as a structuralist approach has highlighted, in dance, movement plays a crucial role in the meaning making process: "meaning is determined by the relationship of the movement to all other aspects that are involved in the dance work" (Jordan and Thomas 6)<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, if we are dealing with dance as embodiment of movement involving the whole person (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 7), then we must recognise that there lies a strongest inevitable nexus between movement and performer. At the same time, different performing bodies could establish individual nexial connections between the substrands so in these cases our appreciation of a dance piece would become quite challenging.

Thirdly, it would complete the definitions of the proposed initial strands to make their expressive complexity explicit, not so much in terms of the potential array of substrands that they can encapsulate, but in terms of their core complementaries. This would mean that we refer to movement/stillness, performer/projection, sound/silence, space/darkness, time/timelessness strands. This would emphasise the opposites by means of which dance pieces become expressive.

Finally, a conception of time is surprisingly missing as one of the distinct strands. Following Laban's identification of weight, space, time and flow (of energy) factors of movement (Laban, The Mastery of Movement), choreology considers them as embodied by the performer and manifested in the movement. But as with the concept of space, time can be considered in relation to the whole performance as well.

The choreological perspective acknowledges evolving cultural practices and shifting interpretations in the contemporary world, without assumed or fixed performative models. It allows us to constantly interrogate dance events understanding the tension between evolving traditions and breaking from them. This position offers a starting point and should be considered as a tentative stance from which to approach dance, but ideally not exclusively dance practices from the West. As we saw before, choreology is implicated in methods of understanding the processes of creating, performing and appreciating works of dance art. I will focus now the last of these processes, which refers to how audiences perceive, engage with and interpret the expressive strands of dance performances.

A choreological view considers that it is characteristic of theatrical dance to present a multisensory performative experience, i.e. an expressive exchange with an audience through a variety of channels (visual, aural and kinetic). The issue that interest me here is not only how these strands are treated together and become expressive but also what an audience makes of them, something we know very little about.

During performance, the expressive strands of a dance are presented in a particular way to an audience who, by being there, is ready to perceive the piece, expects to engage with it and seeks to understand it. Choreological discourse implies the idea of an active viewer who responds to the work and creates meanings (Foster 56). In fact, it acknowledges performance as a moment of 'intersubjectivity' between performer and spectator (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 110) who are both actively committed to the happening and transaction of the work. This perspective, however, assumes too much from the performer and concentrates too much on the semiotic transaction neglecting the aesthetic dimension in the experience of art. It also ignores responses to dance art from other cultures.

I will discuss the appreciation of dance art from a wider choreological perspective that allows the expression of an aesthetic point of view and seeks an understanding of these processes across cultures. Choreology points out to "engaging with the work phenomenally" as the primary theatrical experience, an experience where understanding is sometimes not relevant (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 271). This resonates with Danto's separation of perception from interpretation (Danto) revealing two main levels of experience with aesthetic implications<sup>9</sup>.

## **Perception and Engagement**

Artistic perception in the context of dance art is a fundamental human capacity for awareness and recognition through attention to sensory stimuli. Artistic perception of dance could be considered as involving external, internal and abstract perspectives; such as perceiving the physical realisation of the strands and their nexial connections, recognition of biomechanical functioning of the body, awareness of the presence of expressions and motivations, etc. However, I would like to highlight that perception in such a rich environment happens in a rather incomplete and elusive manner. The viewer is forced to make immediate choices constantly as to what to perceive, what to attend, at each particular moment. The how and why of our choices remains unexplored.

In considering perception of dance performances it has been emphasised the inescapability of the physicality of the body, the expressive qualities of the anthropomorphic presence in dance (Carroll and Banes, "Expression, Rhythm and Dance" 18) or what has been described by Margolis as its 'natural expressiveness'. Royce has argued that the fact that the human body is involved means that responses "are seldom neutral" (159). In addition to this immediacy of a response to the human body, there is also a response connected with the way the body is being represented in a dance piece. This has been explained by Hammergren as an experience where we unite a diversity of personas. The dancer can be viewed as a specific person, a professional artist, a performance persona, and can bring to mind images of other personas "without losing track of a possible meaning concerning the phenomenon as such" (187). The represented body has been described as corporeal, i.e. "personal, social, emotional, animal, mineral, vegetable, sexual, biological, psychological, as well as an agent of motion, and one that is given a context, a space, which is in itself socio-personal, political, domestic, abstract, conscious, unconscious, etc." (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 9). But the body can also be represented as reified or dehumanised, i.e. "disempowered creatively and objectified" (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 10), for instance, Deutsch has mention how Asian cultures (Chinese, Japanese and Indian) aim at "impersonality or trans-personality of aesthetic content which enables the artwork to serve as a bearer of meaning" (164)

Perception of dance art leads to engagement with the piece, a response that is linked to aesthetic appreciation at an affective level. This implies the viewer's capacity to feel, to show sensibility, to enjoy the work's qualities, to find it expressive. In recognising expressivity in the perception of how the strands and the connections between them manifest, we open the door to aesthetic responses to the work; and here, in this shared universal experience of art, we potentially encounter the very first cultural frontier, one that can separate us physically and emotionally from the other. Selma J. Cohen has talked about this experience of perception and engagement disconnecting them from understanding:

"we enjoy the movements of the ballerina without feeling the need to define their meaning. We take pleasure in the visual designs made by her body, in the harmony of her balanced poses ... in the musicality of her phrasing, which gives emphasis at climactic moments ... in her control of the dynamics, the play of swift, sharp movements against softly flowing ones. We enjoy these patterns for their own sake and interest even above their interest of meaning" ("A Prolegomenon" 20)

But if we take that perception is coloured by our underlying concepts (McFee, Understanding Dance 40) and culture-oriented expectations which are "shaped by individual and social history" (Hanna 191), ethnic differences, aesthetic presuppositions

(Deutsch 168) as well as time and space categories (Kaikkonen 76), then in perceiving the artistic dance of the 'other' we will perceive the expressive strands of the medium differently and this will, in turn, affect the nature of our emotional engagement, i.e. of our aesthetic experience. To concepts and expectations framed by culture, choreology adds a personal subjective dimension that includes attitudes, memory and experiences. We could say that this cultural personal frontier determines the attention we pay to each of the different strands of a dance piece and how we connect them together. Therefore, to go back to Cohen's example, someone unfamiliar with the balletic tradition might not be able to see the ballerina's 'control of the dynamics' or enjoy 'her balanced poses' but might appreciate it and enjoy it from a very different perspective.

## **Understanding**

Another layer of the audience's experience of dance art is related to its capacity for meaning making. As stated above, in the theatre the audience seeks understanding of the work of dance art. By understanding I refer to a critical cognitive activity that could be approached in three different ways, namely recovering/retrieving the established meaning of a performance, interpreting/translating it, or co-constructing it. The use of each of these options depends on how the piece is proposed to us, but in any case the viewer requires to perform an act of framing (Carroll and Banes, "Expression, Rhythm and Dance" 19) and for this they need access to internal and external contextual aspects of the piece.

There have been many suggestions as to the contextual knowledge necessary to appreciate and interpret dance as an art form (Best 170; Lange, "The Nature of Dance" 17; Margolis 175; Van Camp, "The Philosopher" 2; Redfern 99). But context includes explicit and implicit or invisible features of cultural values, beliefs and intentions (Chan 255), a complexity of conceptual, kinaesthetic and affective factors some of which are not found in the dance itself (Sklar 7; Kaeppler 117). With respect to explicit contextual features, Foster, for example, named as relevant the ideas of the choreographer as well as the dancer's and viewer's interaction with them, the knowledge of traditions, and of choreographic conventions (56). Deutsch has also referred to contextual understanding making distinctions between four strata of meaning but looking specifically at categories of meaning "necessary for understanding and appreciating aesthetically the artwork" from other cultural traditions (167) These are: 1) Cultural-authorial Weltanschauung, knowledge of the world view of an artist, 2) Cultural-Authorial Aesthetic preferences, criteria of aesthetic expectations and needs, 3) formal content, cultural specific criteria for formal content, 4) symbolic values, arbitrary conventional symbols. However they seem to apply equally to an intracultural interpretative situation.

Whether the audience should recover, interpret or co-construct the meaning, without access to context, genres, styles, codes, choice of strands and their ways of combining them we can only reach understanding by chance, and without willingness to revise our attitudes and expectations, we stand no chance. We have found here another frontier traced by our lack of knowledge of the contextual factors as well as our personal attitude confronting a work. Facing these cultural and personal barriers we cannot get to the polysemanticism operating in a piece, and therefore we cannot proceed to a critical aesthetic appreciation and judgement. This can happen, of course, when appreciating dances from a different culture but also when innovation is brought to dance traditions we are familiar with.

## **Cross-cultural Appreciation of Dance**

Despite the cultural frontiers identified, I would like to conclude bringing the idea of the aesthetic potential of engaging the viewer to appreciate the expression of the artistic other. In the exposure to culturally diverse dance performances in the theatre, we are bound to encounter "the ontological new" (Hastrup 32) which "has the possibility of affecting our social perspectives, encouraging a greater flexibility in our sensual and intelligible understanding of our lives" (Cohen Bull 285 ). Our experiences of unfamiliar dance performances might be limited with respect to the possibility of a similar and even complete appreciation and understanding due to our cultural viewpoints. But individual willingness to engage and understand them would find that these experiences can contribute to:

- reflections on hidden cultural aspects of familiar dance performances.
- self-perception and reinterpretation.
- curiosity about the artistic other.
- the development of cultural sensitivity, i.e "a cultivated mode of relating to the world" (Chan 255).
- expansion of our aesthetic repertoire.

There is a need for future work on more effective understanding of the aesthetics of dance theatre in different cultural contexts and comparative studies of their creative processes, performances and appreciation. Starting from practical dance research in a variety of contexts, choreology could perhaps be employed crossculturally to investigate the nexus between the strands, how they become expressive, their meanings and how a variety of audiences respond to diverse dance events.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on this see e.g. Noël Carroll and Sally Banes, "Working and Dancing: A Response to Monroe Beardsley's 'What Is Going on in a Dance?'" Dance Research Journal 15.1 (1982). Gregory Scott, "Banes and Carroll on Defining Dance," Dance Research Journal 29.1 (1997), Noël Carroll and Sally Banes, "Expression, Rhythm and Dance: A Response to Gregory Scott," Dance Research Journal 30.1 (1998), Noël Carroll and Sally Banes, "Beardsley, Expression and Dance: A Reply to Gregory Scott," Dance Research Journal 31.2 (1999). An additional difficulty is the fact that dance art has always had an intimate relationship with other arts, playing constantly with the limits of the dance domain and proposing new ones. Dance Theatre is, for instance, a late 20th century European concept that works in the intersection of both dance and theatre. Famous practitioners in this area are the Pina Bausch's Tanztheater, Yolande Snaith's Theatre Dance Company, DV8 Physical Theatre. More recently, works under the concept of Dance for the Camera reflect a new hybrid art where dance and film share their particular ways of expressing.

<sup>3</sup> An issue mostly addressed by anthropologists. See, for instance, Richard Waterman, "Role of Dancing in Human Society: Address and Conversations," Focus on Dance 2 (1962), Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, "Theories and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance," Ph.D., Indiana University, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Adopted initially by Rudolf Laban <ADD hodgson 20ss>, the concept of choreology was subsequently understood as a theory of movement encompassing a variety of sub-disciplines. Choreology has been particularly attractive to anthropologists who seek a scientific approach to the study of movement patterns <Kurath 177 Royce> but the term was also used in 1947 by Rudolf and Joan Benesh to name their notation system, they defined choreology as "the scientific and aesthetic study of all forms of human movement" <Benesh 17>.

<sup>5</sup> This classification and description of the strands is very close to the sign systems proposed in the context of semiotics of the theatre and drama in Tadeusz Kowzan, "Le Signe Au Théâtre: Introduction À La Sémiologie De L'art Du Spectacle," Diogenes 61 (1968).

<sup>6</sup> In his work he mentions that in theatrical art "the urge for values is revealed by the artist on the stage by means of expressive movement, that is movement of the body and movement of the mind" Rudolf Laban, The Mastery of Movement, 4th ed. (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1988) 98.

<sup>7</sup> Cf with the view that sees the performer's body as the medium Anya Peterson Royce, The Anthropology of Dance, 2nd ed. (London: Dance Books, 1977) 159, Mary Sarridge and Adina Armelagos, "The Role of 'Natural Expressiveness' in Explaining Dance," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism xli.3 (1983).

<sup>8</sup> See also David N. Best, Expression in Movement and the Arts. A Philosophical Enquiry (London: Lepus Books, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Margolis