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A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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DANCE AS A SIGN: DISCOVERING THE RELATION BETWEEN DANCE MOVEMENT AND CULTURE*

INTRODUCTION

Dance is a type of human activity that combines the physical and the emotional with the intellectual, the individual with the social. The culture of a community, as well as the individual experiences of the dancer as an interpreter, are inscribed and presented in the movements of the dance. During the social process of constructing the human body, cultural values are embodied and become part of dancers' physicality. This article presents examples of the relationship between culture, dance, and the body in the fields of communication, the social hierarchy, social values, relations between the individual and the group, and relations between genders, from the perspective of the sociology of the dance. The sociological perspective indicates, as well, the various (historical, ritual, control, regulatory, etc.) roles that dance can play in the community in which it arose and is performed.

This text is based on my theoretical research on dance, which I conducted during a six-year study on ballroom dancers (Byczkowska 2012).

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The theoretical perspective of my studies is symbolic interactionism, which indicates the active role of the social actor in social reality (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993). Adopting the methodology of grounded theory (Byczkowska 2019; Konecki 2016) led me to compare various dance genres and then to sociological reflection on the universal relations between culture and the human body as presented through dance movements. As a consequence of the theoretical perspective and methodology that I adopted, as well as the outcomes of my research, I hold that dance is a human activity irreducible to text. Therefore, I do not treat the human body or dance as narration, although I acknowledge the perspective presented by various academics (see also: Gilbert 1992; Goellner, Shea Murphy 1995).

This article is not meant to present the above-mentioned problems from a dance-studies, theatre-studies or dance-pedagogics perspective, nor does it give an in-depth interpretation of movement, nor a detailed history of each presented genre, as such is not its aim.

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From a sociological perspective, dance culture, as well as particular elements of dance, such as body posture, rhythm, costumes, steps, and figures, are closely interrelated with the culture and philosophy of a society (Kubinowski 1997: 13–16). Each element of a dance—the patterns of movement that are used—is part of the culture and reality of the community in which it originated. The dance's specific meaning and aims (for example, magical, ritual, religious, or entertainment purposes, etc.) are evidence of the values of the community and the mental qualities of its members (Kubinowski 1997: 19, 81–83). In many traditional communities, dancing is an activity that maintains the social order, especially the roles of men and women (Kubinowski 1997: 100). In addition, the rules of dancing together, of inviting a partner to dance, and of behaviour during the dance, are as important as knowing the steps and are considered necessary for mastering the style (Olszewski 2008: 76).

Dance is a very important element of culture and socialization. In many traditional communities it was an important element of informal education (Kubinowski 1997). Many important rituals and other major events in the life of traditional communities were accompanied by dance, which to a certain extent is also true in today's globalizing society. Dance culture, as well as specific elements of the dance, are closely related to culture in the broad sense and to the philosophy of a society. For example, in ballet, lightness and delicacy are particularly valued. All elements of this dance—the patterns of movement and the forms—are supposed to give the dan-

cers an appearance of floating, as if they were striving to detach themselves from the ground. This can be translated in terms of the Christian religion (which, after all, dominated in France and Russia, the countries where ballet developed the furthest) and of valuing God, as associated with heaven. Completely different patterns of movement, which also result from an image of divinity, can be found in the folk dances of many traditional African tribes. As life and wisdom come from Mother Earth, according to these cultures, it deserves respect and honour. In the dances of these peoples, therefore, we see the desire to "delve deep," and this is symbolized by dancing with bent knees, combined with heavy jumps which emphasize the desire to connect with the earth (Grau 2005: 149).

When we look at an individual dancer from this general, cultural perspective, it seems that a dancer's body is utilized as a tool in the particular dance genre (Merleau-Ponty 1965). In situations created by a dancer, like a performance on a dance floor, a dancer is able to withdraw his or her perceived body (Hanna 1988) from the usual, everyday situations and make it create an alternative, separate reality, which is the dance. Certainly, each performance of a dance is embedded in its own context, and situationally interpreted by its creators, partners, and audience.

Various definitions of dance can be found; like many other aspects of culture, dance is understood rather intuitively and is hard to capture verbally. However, in this article I will adopt Judith L. Hanna's definition, which states that dance is a human action that is purposeful from the viewpoint of the dancer and often also from the viewpoint of the community to which he or she belongs. Dance is rhythmic and characterized by culturally defined sequences of non-verbal body movements, which are different from ordinary motor motions and possess an inherent aesthetic value (Hanna 1988). Dance is considered one of the universal types of human expression, because it involves both the body and the mind. Understanding dance therefore has both cultural and biological significance. Dance is a holistic way of communication because the whole body is used for expression. It is an activity that is at the same time a means and a way of communication and an instrument of interaction. It occurs each time through the human body and the human psyche.

DANCE AND SOCIAL NORMS

As I mentioned earlier, dance is a bodily way of expressing community values. Dance encompasses various cultural rules, presenting the desired social order in a non-verbal manner. A lot can be learned about a society

by observing its dancers. Social knowledge about norms usually includes widespread beliefs about gender roles, the social hierarchy, the relation between the individual and the group, and the relation between culture and the human body.

One of the most important rules to appear in almost every dance genre is a clear division between masculine and feminine roles (Kubinowski 1997; Olszewski 2008; Lepecki 2006; Picard 2006). Dance styles such as contact improvisation or *butoh*, which oppose traditional norms, are the exception. In the majority of other genres, gender roles are assigned to dancers in a non-negotiable way. The two gender roles are precisely distinguished from each other in regard to movements, body structures, the admissibility or inadmissibility of specific movements for each sex, facial expressions, and makeup or outfits. Additionally, whether dancers are dancing in male-female couples also tells a lot about the relations of the sexes in public places. Depending on the culture, men and women may interact closely while dancing together (e.g., Latin American dances), hold hands (e.g., the Polish *polonaise*), or not even be present centre stage while dancers of the other sex are dancing (as in Muslim-majority countries, e.g., the Turkish *zeybeck*).

Another role emphasized through dance is the role of the community leader, for instance, the father of a family. This can be seen, for example, in "walking dances" such as the Polish *polonaise*, where the first pair is usually composed of the most important people present. In pageant dances as well, the dancers move one after another, reflecting a kind of social hierarchy. By contrast, dancing in a circle is a reflection of equality: each of the dancers has an equal place in the circle, and none is privileged or distant from the central point.

The relation between the individual and the group may also be observed through the lens of dance. Individualism and collectivism, as basic cultural assumptions, may be observed in a solo ballet performance, where one dancer significantly stands out for a relatively long part of the performance, or in the synchronized dances of hundreds of de-individualized participants, such as those characteristic of communist countries (e.g., China or North Korea).

DANCE AS A STORY

The role of dancers is to pass on a message with their bodies. In each of the genres, the dancers create a separate dance reality, different from what is happening off the stage. What becomes the actual reality of the

dancers is the story to be told through the chosen choreography. The dancers' task is to convince themselves, other dancers, and/or the audience to believe their story, emotions, and impressions. The work of the body is just a means of transmitting an everlasting story within the dance (Byczkowska 2012).

Each dance tells a collective story and each dancer tells an individual story. The story may be specified in varying degrees. The first type are low-context dances, where the dance's course and details are conveyed directly—for instance, in the *bharatanatyam* dance (Varadan 2012) or the Maori warrior *haka* dance.[1] The dancer performs a story with details such as riding a horse and the use of weapons. The second type is a high-context dance, in which the interpretation depends to a large extent on the skill of the observer (Grau 2005: 146). The dancer only reflects the general atmosphere (for example, in the rumba dance of love, or the flamenco style, *solea*—loneliness). One dance can, however, have many levels of meaning. In many cultures, before the invention and popularization of writing—and in some still—folk wisdom and legends were transmitted by means of movement. For example, in Hawaiian *hula* dances the story is recorded in layered motion. In the first layer, there is a very simple story about a flower that grows in the rain. When we go deeper and begin to take away the layers of meaning, we come to the layers of *huna* (traditional Hawaiian wisdom) about water, which is a symbol of life.

Dancing is also an important way to communicate. The addressees of the meanings included in the dance may be observers, a deity, or the dancer himself or herself. When it comes to communicating with the audience, dance—and in particular ballet and contemporary dance—requires observers with knowledge and high skills at reading the meanings transmitted through the movements. Dervish dance may serve as an example of communicating with God. The dancers spin around their own axis counterclockwise, that is, to the left. They start with hands folded on their breasts; as their speed increases, they stretch their arms. The right hand points to the sky, the left hand to the ground. In this way they transmit energy from heaven to earth through their meditating body. Head tilted to the right

[1] Although the *haka* dance is a traditional dance of the aboriginal tribes of New Zealand, it has been successfully brought into the contemporary culture of the country. The dance is performed by, e.g., national football, soccer, or hockey teams before matches, and not only by the aboriginal citizens. Additionally, after the Christchurch attacks in March 2019, a *haka* was performed all over the country in schools, public places, and so forth, to show support for the victims and their relatives.

and lowered eyes are a sign of humility. They spin faster and faster. The trance can last up to several hours and is a kind of prayer.

Dance can also be an internal conversation of the dancer, or even a kind of autotherapy—a possibility of expressing experiences that are difficult to verbalize (see also: Chaiklin, Wengrower 2009). One dance that was initiated as a kind of self-therapy and then transformed into an independent style is the Japanese *ankoku butoh*. I will present the genre as an exemplification of the above-mentioned processes in a separate case study.

JAPANESE *ANKOKU BUTOH* — AN ILLUSTRATION

Butoh is a family of dance and performance techniques initiated at the end of the 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, as a response to their personal experiences.[2] In the original version of *ankoku butoh* created by Hijikata Tatsumi, the body is the centre of experience. It is also a tool of rebellion against an external and internalized social order. The contemporary genre of *butoh*[3] is aesthetically and ideologically distant from the *ankoku butoh* dance originally created by Hijikata Tatsumi (Pastuszak 2014: 12–13).

The original version, *ankoku butoh*, is an example of how a dancer can deal with difficult memories, including childhood and war, through movement. Hijikata Tatsumi was born and grew up in a village, and lived in post-war Japan. His parents were farmers. Therefore, like the majority of small children, he was kept in a basket for many hours, while the adults were working in the field. The children were not heard when they cried, and they could not move for long hours. At a very young age they thus experienced despair, pain, and the inability to move.

These features of human experience are a vital part of *ankoku butoh*. Its pattern of movement includes the trembling of certain body parts, fetal positions, stiffening, or jerking with distortions, twists, or disorganized moves (Kasai, Parsons 2003). Visually, *butoh* may bring to mind a diseased, disabled body in pain (Capiga-Łochowicz 2012: 243).

Post-war Japanese society was permeated by the rebellion and disorientation caused by cultural and political changes (Capiga-Łochowicz

[2] Bruce Baird (as cited in Pastuszak 2014: 59) distinguishes three paths of *butoh* development: the structure-oriented dance of Hijikata Tatsumi, the improvisation-oriented dance of Ohno Kazuo and the spectacle-oriented dance of Maro Akaji.

[3] *Ankoku butoh* is a term used to refer to the original version of the genre as created by Hijikata Tatsumi. *Butoh* is a term used while referring to a group of modern dance forms deriving from *ankoku butoh*.

2012: 241). Although Hijikata Tatsumi referred a great deal to his own unique experiences, this type of movement has found many devoted practitioners, as it is deeply rooted in Japanese culture and philosophy about the dark side of human nature.[4] For decades, generations of dancers around the world have practiced *butoh*, giving the genre the slightly different "flavour" of their own cultures through the dance movements.

Ankoku butoh is an interesting example of how personal experience may become an answer to the existential doubts of a whole generation and of how dance is the cultural and social product of its times. The main essence of *ankoku butoh* is darkness and memory. The original name of *ankoku butoh* —*ankoku buyo*—means "dance of darkness." Hijikata Tatsumi changed the name because *buyo* in Japanese means a dance which may lift a dancer's body up to the sky. By altering the name to *butoh*, the creator wanted to highlight the specificity of the body movements (e.g., strong steps, bent knees, bending, stooping, rolling on the floor, etc.), which were supposed to reach down to Mother Earth in order to get access to forces stronger then the dancer's self and to become their medium (Capiga-Łochowicz 2012: 242). Additionally, the term *butoh* originally referred to genres of dance that were not originally Japanese, and with the introduction of *butoh* by Hijikata Tatsumi, this notion began to designate also the avant-garde, modern genres. The name itself was meant to differentiate the dance genre from Western dance styles, as well as from the traditional Japanese ones, because one of its main aims was to oppose the traditional social order (Pastuszak 2014: 60).

The main questions that *butoh* artists want to answer through movement are what is the Earth to them, who are their ancestors, and to whom do they owe their existence? Therefore, in *butoh*, the body movement is perceived as an act that cannot be controlled by the mind. Its main physical and mental attitude is to integrate dichotomized elements such as consciousness and unconsciousness, or subject and object (Kasai 2000: 353). By turning inward, the *butoh* dancer reaches the very essence of human spiritual existence as illustrated in Japanese mythology. In one of the mythological tales, Amaterasu, the goddess of the Sun, gets angry with her brother and hides herself in a cave, which causes a lack of light and warmth in the world. Not until the sacred dancer performs a long, stamping dance, does she leave the cave. As Mark Holborn states, this is a parallel of the *butoh* movement pattern—only through dance can we reach the dark side of ourselves and bring light (as cited in: Capiga-Łochowicz 2012: 243).

[4] For the first 19 years, the genre developed only in Japan (Pastuszak 2014: 52).

This symbolism is visualized by painting the dancer's body white (or sometimes black or gold). When the paint dries, it starts to flake off the skin and the audience may see cracks on the dancer's body, which signify the slots through which the internal light comes out.

Furthermore, Hijikata Tatsumi's rebellious dance confronted the everlasting socialization of the human body. He was opposed to the automatized movements that we learn from birth and declared that only by destroying those matrixes can freedom of expression be achieved (Kurihara, as cited in Pastuszak 2014: 67). Hijikata Tatsumi sought to free the human body from structures internalized during the process of socialization, for instance, through questioning such actions as standing or walking, which in his eyes symbolized the values of classical dance and Western society. In order to confront a dancer with their own bodily automatisms, Hijikata Tatsumi provoked a body crisis through movement (Pastuszak 2014: 67).

In addition, as a dance of opposition to collectivistic culture, *butoh* is not a dance for show, in which a dancer plays a role. He or she tries to become more and more himself or herself with each dance. This can only be done by breaking the conventions that limit the human body and by exploring the impulses we unconsciously restrict. Japanese culture imposes high body control, which is a common feature for collectivistic cultures, and *butoh* movement is supposed to challenge this rule.[5] As Kasai (2000: 355) states, the philosophy of this genre assumes that a person cannot repeat a planned choreography, even a single movement, as each of us has a different body and different bodily experiences. Even the same dancer cannot repeat the same movement twice, as his or her body has its own language. In the original, non-coded but completely improvised form of *butoh* dance, the dancers roll their eyes back in their heads so that they can also look inside themselves (Kasai, Parsons 2003). This has been a difficult issue for *butoh* dancers from Western cultures. As Kasai and Parsons write (2003: 260):

> People from Western cultures tend to hold or maintain eye contact longer than most Japanese. For the typical Westerner, this might be done to establish trust, and to convey respect for the speaker; relatively brief eye contact may arouse mistrust, or fail to communicate proper respect. To the typical Japanese, however, a direct, extended gaze might convey disrespect, or invoke a challenge.

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[5] It is not surprising though, that *butoh* became popular in Germany, which has a similar war history as Japan, and German culture as well requires high body control.

This illustrates that cultural differences become evident in dance movements — even the smallest eye movements. Therefore, the ability to "read the meanings" that are present in the dance movement is an effect of long socialization in a certain culture.

Ankoku butoh, as rooted in Japanese culture, is deeply related to Zen Buddhism, and several of its aspects are projected through the movements of *ankoku butoh*. The first, pure experience, is the movement of un-objectified reality itself. The second assumes that the place where the dance occurs is itself dancing, and the dancer will be created by the place in which he or she is dancing. The third feature, in-between-ness, shows that movement and the body are transient. The mutual resonance between the surroundings and the dancer is the fourth aspect of Zen Buddhist philosophy present in *ankoku butoh* movements. The fifth keyword for understanding the meaning of the genre is "self-so-ing"—the movement is itself, whatever it is. Additionally, in *butoh*, every moment is the appearance of life and death, which are not perceived as two different things—this is the sixth feature of the philosophy (Kasai 2003: 358). *Ankoku butoh* densely integrates these factors both for the dancer's and the audience's experience.

As the above description of *ankoku butoh* shows, the relation between dance-movement patterns and the message is not limited to traditional folk dances. Hijikata Tatsumi's aim was to discover the internal truth of a particular dancer by breaking the culture's rules of high body control. At the same time, he strongly linked the dance movement with Japanese mythology and Zen Buddhist philosophy. This proves that the symbolism of the culture we were brought up in is a deep element of our physical selves and that we cannot simply distance ourselves from it.

As dance is a universal feature of every culture, it satisfies vital human needs. Although created by one dancer, the story of the *butoh* dance and the meanings transmitted through the movements—the dark side of human experience and memory—correspond with the lived experience of several generations of dancers after the 1950s. As such, it mirrors the problems of the individual in a globalizing world.

CONCLUSIONS

As the example of *ankoku butoh* shows, each dance and its specific body movements are created in relation to the community in which they originated. Even modern dance genres, which question traditional values and express their performers' opposition to the existing social order, always

relate to the values of the society and are a way of communicating with them. As such, they attract dancers of similar experiences and values and form new communities. These groups produce their own ideas of perfect appearance and body movement, which illustrate a new, constructed subculture. The ability to perform and "read" the meanings in such a new genre appears to be the effect of long socialization and learning, as with traditional dances.

Additionally, in this way dance is a human activity that connects the individual (e.g., the body, performance, experiences, emotions, etc.) with the collective (culture, values, norms, generational experience, etc.). As such, it plays an important role in various spheres of cultural life, for instance, in rites of passage or religious holidays. Dance as a sign and as a carrier of meanings is one of the cultural universals—it appears in various forms in all known cultures, and moreover, new genres of it are constantly being created. This means that dance responds to the common needs of individuals and communities. Getting to know dance is really to know the nature of humans and their cultures. Dance allows for the incorporation of meanings that cannot be verbalized. It had an important role in the preservation of human history. Together with legends and mythologies, it was a carrier of social norms, philosophy, and culture before the invention and popularisation of writing. The stories were present in the movements of the dancers and the messages were passed to following generations.

However, the dance is never a simple copy of an original set of movements. Each performance is interpreted by its participants and viewers in a particular context. Meanings transmitted through movements are perceived to concern the situation in which the dancer or dancers perform, therefore they may tell a quite different story each time they are presented.

At the same time, dance is a very flexible and adaptive way of expression. Although it is usually strictly codified, it is always interpreted by an individual dancer and expressed through that dancer's body. During the social process of constructing the human body, cultural values are embodied and become part of dancers' physicality. The body, like any other object that has been influenced by culture, is socially constructed. Although it may seem that the human body is a set of biological elements, it is also crucially influenced by social norms, rules, and values, as was proven by one of the studies conducted by Turner and Wainwright (2003). These researchers studied the social construction of injuries among ballet dancers. They state that the increasing expectations of ballet dancers in the last decades have caused harder and harsher dieting, training, and athletic

effort. This has pushed the limits of the human body and redefined injury, dieting, and medical care. What used to be defined as injury, is no longer called by that name. Furthermore, during the socialization of the dance, a dancer learns how to differentiate kinds of pain and to tell whether they are a sign of a health hazard, or of well-trained, sore muscles.

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Abstract

This article presents examples of the relationship between culture, dance, and the body in the fields of communication (with oneself, the community, God/deity), the social hierarchy, social values, relations between the individual and the group, and relations between genders, from the perspective of the sociology of the dance. The sociological perspective also indicates the various historical, ritual, control, and regulatory roles that traditional and modern dances play in the communities in which they arise and are performed. The second part of the text contains a case study of the Japanese *ankoku butoh* dance. The author presents the philosophical roots of the dance (e.g., Japanese mythology, Zen Buddhist philosophy) and the creator's personal experiences (childhood trauma and post-war social situation) as factors that influenced the dance's development. The example of *ankoku butoh* illustrates the interrelation between cultural meanings and dance movements.

Key words / słowa kluczowe

dance / taniec, body / ciało, gender, *ankoku butoh*, sign / znak