

# DANCE, MIMESIS, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE IMAGINATION

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*Technique is both the animating aesthetic principle and the core ambivalence housed in every dance studio and manipulated by every teacher, every choreographer, every performer. It is both taskmaster and mastered both warden and liberator. It demands to be replicated even as it asks to be exceeded.*

Judith Hamera (2007, 4).

JUDITH HAMERA'S QUOTE FROM *DANCING COMMUNITIES* suggests the impact of dance training and related technique on the body and psyche of a dancer. As Hamera indicates, the pedagogical method employed to transmit the technique from the body of the teacher to that of student is specific to each dance form and related technologies. Furthermore, dancers strive to master a technique through a process of repetitive replication of a movement vocabulary that will allow them to embody the cultural aesthetic inherent in the technique. Recently, I was reminded of this ongoing process for dancers during a visit to Merce Cunningham's studio. The visit was arranged as part of the annual conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Cunningham had agreed to demonstrate for this group how he uses the computer software *Danceforms* as part of his choreographic process. *Danceforms* is a program that allows a choreographer to generate a movement phrase which can be changed by using a series of icons. A manipulator can use these icons to adjust the movement by altering the gesture of a specific body part—arms, legs, torso, head—or body parts in relationship to each other. The change of gesture can incorporate such aspects as direction, spatial use, motional quality, timing, and so on.

For the demonstration, the Cunningham studio was set up with rows of seats along one wall facing a large screen at the opposite end of the room. Cunningham sat near the screen behind a computer on one side of the studio. He started the session with an explanation of *Danceforms* and then brought in two members of his company to help demonstrate his process. A movement phrase was played on the screen for the dancers; they were then asked to replicate the phrase while it was played again. Following their performance of the phrase, Cunningham, using random chance procedures, in this case the throwing of a dice, revised the screen image and asked the dancers to match their movement to the new image. He made no attempt to verbally instruct the dancers but relied solely on the screen image as the means of communication. Although familiar with the Cunningham movement vocabulary, the dancers had difficulty performing the screen image and would periodically lose their balance or fail to articulate a transition from one movement phrase to another. As I watched the dancers struggle to match their performance to the screen image, I pondered the impact of different modes of communication and technology on the transmission of dance and the relationship between teacher and student.

For example, what was the experience of the dancer in the dance studio as opposed to the student engaged in a mediated environment of analog or digital formats? My reflections included my own experience of different teaching environments from those of the mirrored dance studio, to the individualised lessons of Nihon Buyo, and a personal attempt to learn tango from a video tape. Although these are only three of the many dance forms and possible teaching strategies that encourage distinctive integrations of a dancer's corporeal awareness and processes of perception, I will incorporate them into this essay to consider the impact of different pedagogical environments and related technologies on what Thomas Csoradas refers to as 'somatic modes of attention,' which he defines as the "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (2002, 244).

The standard method of dance training, professional and amateur, is through direct transmission from the body of the teacher to the body of the dancer. This process, a form of imitation, is therefore indirectly related to the concept of *mimêsis*. *Mimêsis* traces its lineage to Aristotle who seemed to define it as a literal imitation, a replication of nature. Michael Davis, a translator and commentator on Aristotle, expands upon this generally accepted definition in his book *The Poetry of Philosophy* (1999). He notes that *mimêsis* is really an act of selection, "[i]mitation always involves selecting something from the continuum of experience, thus giving boundaries to what really has no beginning or end" (3). Furthermore, he suggests that, "[m]imêsis involves a framing of reality that announces that which is contained within the frame is not simply real. The more 'real' the imitation is the more fraudulent it becomes" (3). Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) sites Walter Benjamin in noting that *mimêsis* and the mimetic faculty, which is pivotal for our basic survival, is also the skill we use to adapt to environments including interactions with people we designate as other. According to Benjamin, technology adopts our mimetic ability via an imitation of our senses. For example, cameras create still and moving images in an imitation of humans' visual ability which ultimately develops within those same individuals an 'optical consciousness', a consciousness that would according to Benjamin via Taussig "create a new sensorium involving a new subject-object relation and therefore a new person" (24).

This optical consciousness has been an ever present part of dance training since the mirror, an early form of reflective technology, was introduced into the ballet studio some time in the nineteenth century. Cynthia Cohen Jean Bull notes that the mirror is an ever present partner "to the ballet student and performer, ballet dancers practice by executing repetitive movement patterns while being watched by a teacher or choreographer and by watching their own reflected image" (1997, 272). In the majority of contemporary studios, a group of students study with one instructor. The instructor performs movements in front of a mirror and the students standing behind the instructor use both mirror and an observation of the instructor to imitate the movements. The teacher will sometimes adjust the body of a dancer in order to help them to understand the kinesthetic meaning of a specific arrangement of the body or suggest a metaphor for a particular integration of body parts. This interaction is however mitigated by the ever present mirror and students of ballet primarily rely on the subject/object relationship of optical consciousness in the development of a consciously 'gazing self' or self as an abstract expression of line, shape, and form for which they must discover some internal emotional attachment. Historically, the emotional life of the dancer was tied to the narrative structure of ballet with such stories as "Sleeping Beauty", "Swan Lake", and "The Nutcracker".

During the twentieth century, the ballet cannon expanded beyond the story ballets. As suggested by dance historians Reynolds and McCormick (2003), ballet technique, including its pedagogical method, became part of contemporary dance forms such as modern and jazz. The latter includes the standard practice, with some exceptions such as contact improvisation, of the consistent focus on an act of

imitation of the mirrored image of the instructor's body. The dancers' use of optical consciousness and conscious experience of self is framed by the real or mimêsis through the dancer's self-imposed abstraction of their body and by extension themselves. The ability of the dancer to experience themselves as an abstraction allows them to become imagistic representations for a choreographer's imagination.

An opposing approach to dance and the dancer's body would be the traditional style of training found in the classical Japanese dance form, *Nihon Buyo*. In this form, there is no mirror and the movement vocabulary of the dance is transmitted directly through an imitation of the teacher by the student. For example, a teacher and a single student are in a small studio. The dance student is standing slightly to the right and behind the dance teacher. She can only see the teacher indirectly out of the corner of her peripheral vision. The teacher completes a dance phrase as the student attempts to imitate the movements. There is no mirror to reflect the extent or quality of the teacher's movements. Instead, there is only the teacher's voice as she sings the words or acknowledges the rhythmic underpinnings of the music. Periodically, the teacher physically adjusts one portion of the student's body in relationship to another part. With each repetition of the phrase, the dancer's body increasingly takes on the nuances of the teacher's body—the shifts of weight, the adjustment of the spine and torso, the turn of the head, the placement of the arms and hands—until her entire being embodies the movement phrasing of the teacher.

This method of teaching requires a dancer to integrate all somatic modes of attention to imitate the movement of the teacher in an experience that performance theorist Phillip Zarrilli would call "a total intensive engagement in the moment" (1995, 74). This method is referred to by philosopher and educator Thomas Hanna as 'somatic education.' Describing the ontological development of the body and its evolution from single to multiple cells, Hanna defines 'self' as a *soma*, "a rich and constantly flowing array of sensings and actions that are occurring within the experience of each of us" (1980,10). In phenomenological terms, the dancer has transformed her experience of her 'lived-body' through an intensive engagement with the body of another, a transformation in which the body of the teacher through imitation becomes the object of the student's subjective identity. In this instance, the student becomes an extension of the teacher and any cultural metaphors embedded in the movement vocabulary of the technique. The dualistic subject/object field is united in her somatic consciousness via the total engagement of all sensory modes in a transmission process of intersubjectivity which culminates in the body of the student becoming an image of the body of the teacher. In this form of mimêsis, the vocabulary of the dance may not precisely imitate daily life, instead it may be, to use Eugenio Barba's terminology, 'extra daily'. Regardless, the experience for the dancer is a unification of multiple senses within a single action. The result is an integration of technique and cultural knowledge in a single act and the dancer's embodiment of a very specific cultural consciousness.

The mirror was an early reflective device. Since its invention, its reflective ability has been incorporated into the still photographs of a camera and the moving pictures of film, television, and the internet and these images have been further distributed in analog and digital formats through V.H.S., D.V.D., computers, ipods, etc. Various moving image systems have been used as additional feedback method in some dance classes, but only with the advent of the easily distributed V.H.S. tape have individuals attempted to learn dance from a two dimensional image.

In such learning situations, the student is facing a screen which maybe located in the public context of a dance studio or in the private environment of a home. In either case, the instructor appears on the screen and begins to explain the movements while at the same time demonstrating them. The teacher repeats the movements several times as the camera switches angles to provide the student three or

more views of the movement. Following the demonstration, the instructor asks the student to follow along with her as she does the movement. The teacher and student repeat the same phrase several times prior to moving to the next set of movements.

A projected image is a means by which various exercise regimens and dance forms are now taught via V.H.S., D.V.D. and the Internet through such projects as Vienna-based dancer Shurel Reynolds' online School of Dance. This online school utilises e.learning and multimedia technologies to teach traditional, popular and ethnic dance. The dancer viewing a screen image uses her optical consciousness to pick up visual information and kinesthetically recreate it as dance phrases. Relying on webcams, feedback of the dancer's performance will be online through subsequent written communication between student and teacher following the teacher's review of the student's previously recorded image. Although this form of transmission is similar to the ballet studio in its reliance on seeing as the primary mode of learning, V.H.S., D.V.D., and online formats participate in an experience of embodied consciousness that relies on the camera as the perceptual intermediary between teacher and student. The student's interaction and immersion in the dance form are mediated by the ability of the camera to relay the movement phrasing of the teacher and the student as well as by the ability of each to respond through asynchronous written communication to questions from the student to the teacher and critical responses from the teacher.

Online, digital and analog formats offer an opportunity for individuals to participate in the privacy of their homes as dance students without inhibitions associated with size, age, race or gender that they might feel in the public environment of a dance studio. In terms of V.H.S. and D.V.D. programs, the dancer also has a level of choice and freedom about the quality and style of her interaction and immersion with the screen image. She can choose to learn some movements and not others or change the movement in a way that suits the age, shape, or prior experience of her body. In informal V.H.S. or D.V.D. situations, the dancer is safe in the knowledge that the media teacher is not observing her personal, idiosyncratic imitation that relies on previously learned physical vocabulary and related arrangements of spine, torso, legs, feet, arms, and head. As opposed to a ballet or somatically based dance class, she will not be corrected for the form or quality of her movement. Although there are potentially mitigating factors related to her life outside of the digital dance class, the student in the mediated class is, by comparison to her counterparts in previous classes described, a free agent who personally determines her embodiment of the dance form. As such, she participates in the opportunity that digital formats provide for experimenting with a performed identity.

As such media scholars as Ong (1999) and Hayles (1999) have pointed out, the community and personal viewing practices have evolved with the increasingly self-directed attributes of technology during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Early films were shared by a community in a theatre setting. This was also the case of the early days of television and the family living room. By the end of the twentieth century, videos, D.V.D.s, and computer access have made dancing images a part of an individual's relationship with the media. Increasingly, individuals who practice popular forms of dance buy copies of teaching videos that provide the basic movement vocabulary of the form. The 'lived' body of the dance teacher is (re) constructed by the technology of the method of delivery. The student's practice of the dance is mediated by camera angles and the ability of a two-dimensional format to represent a three-dimensional body. Media theorist Ron Brunett suggests that the imagination of the participant is engaged in the virtual world through the use of their "imagination and energy to push the boundaries of their perceptions and to make their bodies respond to what they are looking at" (2004, 131). The student learns the form via the media and further extends this process by using her imagination and prior knowledge of the form's culture and history in a setting where there is no

critical or corrective feature. Her imagination and performance of self are therefore framed within a virtual world. Any performance the media trained dancer creates either in the 'live' or 'virtual' world is therefore evolved from an integration of various media experiences.

Mark Johnson and George Lakoff in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) articulate a view of knowledge that is based on the habitual and often unrecognised, in terms of its impact, of an individual's development in relationship to their environment. They espouse a paradigm in which linguistic categories and associated metaphors are the culmination of the relationship between the body's neural structures, related physical structure of the body, and the context of experience. For example, balance as a metaphor for various aspects of life is derived from corporeal experience as a child moves from crawling to walking. The child continues to explore balance as she learns to ride a bike and other physical skills.

Later, this embodied knowledge acts as a metaphor that conceptually impacts her experience of work/life balance, concepts of justice, and a sense of fiscal responsibility as in a balanced checkbook. As Pierre Bourdieu (1990) points out with his theorisation of habitus, the repetitiveness of the act intersects with the context of the act to create a memory in which body and mind are entwined. Consciousness theorist James Taylor's relational theory advocates similarly that "consciousness necessarily emerges from the relational activity of suitably connected neural networks" (1999, 45). The interplay of the reflections of Lakoff, Johnson, Bourdieu and Taylor reveal all bodily actions, including dance, are reliant on the conscious repetitive use of neural networks within a particular set of intersecting relationships. In terms of dance, the conscious experience of the dancer is a result of mimetic repetition within the context of distinct learning environments that engage differing modes of communication.

The three methods of dance instruction and environments I have sketched here could be titled based on their primary method of transmission; optical, somatic, and mediated. Each teaching method relies on repetition of movement to promote a consciousness experience that ultimately informs the dancer's experience of self—as an abstraction in the case of ballet and modern dance, as a container of cultural symbols in terms of *Nihon Buyo*, and as a free agent for the dancer involved with mediated formats. One of the distinctions between the three is the differing metaphoric embodiments of the subject-object relationship. The ballet and modern dancer through the reflection in the mirror becomes her own object. The somatic dancer subsumes her identification to the body of the teacher and becomes a repository of cultural symbols. The free agent techno dancer surfs identities in a corporeal experience that unites, within her imagination, the training of the dance with the media context of the dance.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests that this integration between the body and its mediation through global technology has created a world in which the imagination is social practice. He summarises, "The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global processes: the imagination as a social practice" (1996, 31). Each dance student's lived experience participates in this global imaginary from a different perspective depending on her dance training--the ballet and modern student experiences self as an abstraction; the somatic student is a receptacle of a cultural imaginary, and the student who learns via the media engages a shifting frame of somatic reference as she chooses to embody some images and not others. The consciousness of each dancer has been shaped by the method of transmission in which they have been engaged, and as such they have participated in divergent forms of mimêsis.



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