

Chapter #8

DANCE AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION Psychological and Social Aspects

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we analyze dance as a medium of communication. Human body is the basic instrument of dance since the dancer communicates with others using his/her movements. As such, dance has a great potential to be a medium of communication of various feelings, needs, ideas, intentions, concepts and bodily sensations. Unlike those who dance spontaneously, professional dancers do not communicate the feeling that they are experiencing at that moment, but their movements show the specific feeling that is connected to the whole story imagined by the choreographer. As a medium of communication, dance articulates creative self-expression, body attractiveness and eroticism as well as socialization and contact with another person. These aspects of what is communicated using dance are analyzed throughout the chapter. It is concluded that due to its complexity and universality dance represents a very rich and powerful means for those who need to communicate something either just by using rhythmical movement or by mastering a more symbolical system which can be found in dance as a form of art.

Keywords: dance, communication, self-expression, socializing, eroticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance as a unique and complex phenomenon may fulfill many functions and provide a wide range of meanings to a person who practices it. In the broadest sense, dance can be defined as any rhythmic-bodily movement in space, while dance as a form of art can be defined as a specific type of complex and highly articulated movements. It is a system of organized and formalized movements which the artist consciously expresses and deliberately conveys to the observer (see more in: Blom & Chaplin, 2000; Carter, 1998; Džadžević, 2005; Jowit, 1994; Layson, 1994; Meekums, 2005; Tufnel & Crickmay, 2006; Vukadinović, 2019). In search for understanding the motivation for dancing, various authors have addressed the question of why people dance or what drives them to perform this universal human activity (Christensen, Cela-Conde, & Gomila, 2017; Lovatt, 2016, 2018; Maletić, 1986; Maraz, Király, Urbán, Griffiths & Demetrovics, 2015, Vukadinović, 2019, 2022). Many answers to these questions have been given from the standpoint of different approaches and from various perspectives including psychological, historical, anthropological, sociological, evolutionary, cultural, artistic, neurobiological and medical ones. These are often combined and intertwined, and many authors insist on taking into account different aspects of dance in order to achieve a holistic approach in its research. In summary, it can be stated that among the reasons why people dance, two important tendencies stand out. The first one is mainly physical and it includes the innate human need for rhythmic movement, expression of emotions, improvement of physical condition and form and acquisition of skills. The second is mostly psychological and it includes the need for creative self-expression, aesthetic experience, for the symbolic transformation of experiences, for improving mood and

self-confidence, for escaping from reality, as well as the need to gather in a community by socializing and establish intimacy with other people (c.f. Vukadinović, 2019, 2022). Considering all these motivators and potentials of dance, the feelings it can produce, as well as the changes it can bring, it is very widely used in many areas as a medium (c.f. Vukadinović, 2019). In this chapter, different aspects of dance as a medium of communication will be explored and analyzed.

2. BACKGROUND

Human body is the basic instrument of dance since the dancer communicates with others using his/her movements. As previous studies have shown, dance has a great potential to be a medium of communication of various feelings, needs, ideas, intentions, concepts and bodily sensations (Christensen, et al., 2017; Džadžević, 2005; Hanna, 1995; Maletić, 1986; Vukadinović, 2013, 2022; Vukadinović & Marković, 2017, 2022). By dancing spontaneously, people can communicate the widest range of their feelings and states expressing them with body movements. Moreover, in dance as a form of art, dancers symbolically represent and conjure up different thoughts, states, ideas and feelings through different movements and their combinations. One of the major communicative functions is that dance through body movements enables interaction between people. “Dancing” interaction between people has also been emphasized in previous studies dealing with the importance of the social aspect of dance (Džadžević, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2008; Maletić, 1986; McNeill, 1995; Sebanz, Bekkering, & Knoblich, 2006; Tarr, Launay, Cohen, & Dunbar, 2015; Taylor & Taylor, 1995). It has been suggested that dance was very often a medium for bringing people together and strengthening the connections between community members (Deniker, 1900; Džadžević, 2005; Janković & Janković, 1949, 1964; Neveu-Kringelbach & Skinner, 2014). In addition, Christensen and collaborators refer to the results of bio-behavioral studies and neuroscience research that support this function of dance (see more in Christensen et al., 2017, p. 20). They single out two interconnected neural mechanisms that underlie the cohesive effect of dance. The first one refers to the neuroendocrine mechanisms of increased oxytocin and prolactin secretion during the exchange of positive experiences, which takes place during dancing when people move in synchronization with the rhythm, guided by the same goal and common mood (Christensen et al., 2017; Walker & McGlone, 2013). Another neural mechanism refers to the stimulation of specific receptors in the skin that are activated during “social touch”, hugs and movement while dancing in pairs.

Furthermore, along with other topics, in our earlier study we have explored what dance means for both professional dancers and those who practice dance as recreation (Vukadinović, 2022). The study included fewer professionals than those for whom it is a hobby or recreation. The experience of people engaged in various forms of dance (classical ballet, contemporary dance, modern ballet, flamenco, hip-hop, tango, salsa, meringue, rumba, bachata, and oriental dances) was examined. There was an equal number of people who practice individual forms of dance and those who practice dance in pairs. Although the answers to the question of what dance means to them were differently formulated, it was possible to classify them into several groups. The most common answer was freedom. Some of them explained that freedom refers to the expression of their own thoughts and feelings, as well as the freedom for a person to be what he/she is. The other group of responses was related to physical and mental health. Participants referred to physical and emotional well-being, fitness, improved self-confidence, “good feeling”, as well as the experience of strength. In the following group of answers, those related to learning something new and

acquiring new skills stood out. Many emphasized that dancing brings them refreshment of the body and improvement of movement motor skills. In addition, a large number of participants emphasized “fun”, socializing and contact with another person. A special group of answers included those related to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. The participants formulated that they feel pleasure, that dancing makes them alive, that they “become the best version of themselves” when they dance, as well as that they “become a better person”. Generally speaking, the results have shown that the possibility to express themselves and socialize with others plays an important role for them (c.f. Vukadinović, 2022). It has also been shown that for those who practice dance as recreation, dance is not just a way of socialization, but it is also a way of seduction and the expression of their sexuality. This implies that dance enables communication of the entire self where all psychological processes could be involved. In that process, dance as a medium of communication contains and unites the motivational, emotional, physical and cognitive components within the experience and the behavior of the dancer. In the following text, three different motives that, among others, can be communicated through dance will be elaborated in more detail.

3. DANCE AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

As it has been emphasized in the introduction, dance as a medium of communication could be understood very broadly because different feelings, intentions, complex psychological states, different stories and new knowledge can be expressed through dance. Furthermore, when it comes to feelings that can be expressed using body movement, the role of kinesthetic empathy and embodied simulation mechanisms is important (Foster, 2007, 2008, 2011; Reason & Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds & Reason, 2012; Montero, 2016; Strukus, 2011). These mechanisms are active not just while dancing (Reason & Reynolds, 2010; Montero, 2016), but also when observing the movements of others and they can be detected on a psychophysiological and neural level (Christensen et al., 2017). However, one should have in mind that unlike those who dance spontaneously, professional dancers do not communicate the feeling that they are feeling at that moment, but their movement shows the specific feeling that is connected to the whole story conceived by the choreographer.

On one hand, dance as a medium of communication, could be explored from the standpoint of its formal characteristics such as specific rhythm, dance form, choreography, level of stylization or complexity, or even dance technique (Vukadinović, 2019). On the other hand, the motif which is expressed through dance could also be an interesting subject for investigation. Even though the content of dance is shaped and colored by the personality of the dancer, and it reflects the particular individual who dances, general motives “spoken” by dance may be categorized. Dance as a medium of communication articulates creative self-expression, body attractiveness and eroticism as well as socializing and contact with another person.

3.1. Creative Self-Expression

As a medium of communication dance is often understood as a means of creative self-expression. This is due to the fact that a lot of different emotions could be expressed through spontaneous dance (Arnhajm, 2003; Christensen et al., 2017; Džadžević, 2005; Maletić, 1986; Martin, 1965; Vukadinović, 2019). For example, the fact that different tribes dance to all the exciting events in their lives, regardless of what caused their excitement, lead Martin (1965) to the conclusion that the roots of dance should be sought in expressing emotions through body movements. He talks about movement as a medium of life, and takes

into account physiological and internal mechanisms and behavior, pointing out the differences in the work of the neuromuscular system while the person is calm and when he/she dances. Observed from a practical point of view, Martin (1965) notes that movements performed in the states of excitement are typical of the emotion that provoked them (Martin, 1965). Arnheim (Arnhajm, 2003) offers a very similar explanation when he cites examples of the term “isomorphism”, which, when it comes to dance, exists in the expression of dancers' movements and in the structure of feelings that a person needs to express through dance.

Furthermore, Džadžević (2005) singles out three theories that define dance as an expression of emotions. One is the “catharsis theory”, according to which dance has a therapeutic effect because it relieves internal tension. The second is the “theory of self-realization and feedback”, which is the opposite of the theory of catharsis. The third is “the theory of love and sexual motives as a mover and factor in creating a dance”. If we look at the dance of today's “primitive” societies, it can be concluded that the sexual motive is one of the most common initiators (Havelock, 1983).

There is also a different kind of research which supports the idea that dance communicates emotions. Starting from the idea that every emotion has a complex neurocognitive and hormonal “signature”, Christensen and collaborators suggest that the need of a person to dance or watch dance may represent a biological or neuroendocrine need for a particular biochemical agent (hormones, neurotransmitters), or its elimination, where the compensation or release of that agent is caused by a certain emotional experience (Christensen et al., 2017, p. 17). They explain that watching dance that provokes feelings of sadness actually helps us to improve the condition of the body because crying is known to release prolactin and increased levels of prolactin are associated with the experience of belonging, comfort and pleasure. For example, when a person has a need to watch sad movies or similar works of art whose content provokes such and similar unpleasant feelings, it can be a type of adaptive behavior that serves to restore the biochemical balance. The stated results of this research are in line with the understanding of neuro-biological correlates which are the basis of dance motivators and which Ana Maletić (1986) recognized as an innate need for the expression of emotions.

However creative self-expression does not refer only to the expression of emotions. It implies creativity, especially in dance as a form of art where gestures, movements and attitudes are stylized, where space is decorated and where dancers wear costumes which also articulate the idea of the choreographer. Moreover, creative expression in artistic dance implies symbolization. According to Suzan Langer (1990) spontaneous dance is a sign of one emotion, while dance as a form of art is usually a symbol for that particular emotion. Dance reaches the level of art when it ceases to be a psycho-motor reaction to current emotional experience. It turns into the work of art when these experiences are projected onto dance and what is being danced, through symbolic expression in movements. According to Langer, dance is driven by imagined emotions and not by real ones that are experienced at that moment (Langer, 1990). Thus, although body movements are real, their meaning is not literal but symbolical.

It can be concluded that dance as a medium of communication represents a very rich and powerful means for those who need to express themselves either just by using rhythmical movement or mastering a more symbolical system which can be found in the dance as a form of art.

3.2. Socializing and Human Contact

Dance is a medium which helps people socialize because it enables their communication on a non-verbal level through their use of body movements. For many people engagement in dance is motivated by the need for socializing and being a part of a wider community as well as by the need for contact. The results of the previous studies showed that an important factor which influences the contact through dance and the level of socializing is whether a person engages in it professionally or recreationally (Maraz et al., 2015). Recreational engagement not only brings more pleasure but also leaves much more freedom to express not only a person's need for contact but also his or her overall personality (Adler, 2006; Burgess, Grogan, & Burvitz, 2006; García Dantas, Amado Alonso, & Sánchez Miguel, 2018; Erfer & Ziv, 2006; Langdon & Petraka, 2010). This can be explained by the fact that people who dance for recreation are free from strict rules of professional performance and achievement. They do not have a given "adequate body weight", nor the requirements of particular dance form that are in front of them. Furthermore, the motives of their dance are different from the motives of professionals.

Because of their formal characteristics, social dances and especially dances in pairs, enable socializing through dance. Under the term social dance, Skippy Blair (1995) presupposes a category that has a social context as well as a social function such as entertainment, ceremony, competition, or the expression of eroticism and sexuality. Dance in pairs i.e. partner dance, involves basic choreography and coordinated movement of two dancers (Lavelle, 1983). According to Hanna (Hanna, 2010, p. 213), "dance conveys meaning through the use of space, touch, proximity to another dancer ... and specific body positions and movements". Moreover, Ana Maletić (1986, p. 127) points out that, when it comes to the physical contact in the primitive dance of couples, if it did not serve as a foreplay, then it represented an allusion to the sexual act and fertility. In artistic dance, the difference in establishing contact and the difference in the level of possible socializing through partner dance is related to its genre. Each genre of dance in pairs has its own criteria of performance and excellence. For example, "street" Latin dances - salsa, bachata, merengue, samba and rumba - emphasize the closeness of the dancers, body contact, hip movements, "falling" into each other's arms, synchronized joint movement and sweating significantly more than other genres of partner dance (Hall, 2018; Whitmore, 2014). Tango, which is also a type of partner dance, uses its dance technique to encourage more performers to make a contact through which they would express and evoke sensuality (Abadi, 2013; Arrizón, 2008; Tateo, 2014).

3.3. Body Attractiveness and Eroticism

Eroticism and attractiveness of the dancer's body is often communicated through dance. It is because the fields of dance, body attractiveness and eroticism are closely related, since the same instrument - the human body - is the bearer of expression and communication in these domains (Hanna, 1988, 2010). Whether it is spontaneous or artistic dance, the body is the content of both its attractiveness and performing expression. Depending on various factors, this expression can be differently valued as symbolic, literal, elegant, seductive, interesting, erotic, etc. (Vukadinović, 2019). The first group of factors consists of those related to dance and the setting in which it is performed (context, music, scenery, costume, lighting). In dance as a form of art, its form (classical ballet, modern dance, standard dances, etc.), as well as formal characteristics within each particular form of dance (dance technique, dynamics, elegance, complexity) affect not only the expression but also the experience of both the performer and the observer. The second group consists of those factors that include the characteristics of the person performing the dance (for example, level of training, level of professionalism, overall appearance, "staging of the performer" (cf. Jaeger, 2009, etc.).

Finally, the third group includes factors related to the physical characteristics of the dancer's body. When considering the body attractiveness and the expression of eroticism through dance, it is necessary to keep in mind all these factors, as well as their interaction. For example, content that has nothing to do with sexuality can be erotically colored by the performance style of the dancer himself, or the attractiveness of his body. Or vice versa, content that has a predominantly erotic theme can be performed by a player who looks completely asexual in appearance. This means that the attractiveness of the performer's body can be both very important and completely irrelevant, and can also be based on various criteria, from his/her appearance to the performing technique. Thus, the attractiveness of the body in dance is subordinated to the criterion of competence with which it is performed and symbolically represents some content conceived by dance. Even when the content that is represented by dance is full of sexual motives, the dancing technique by which that content is expressed seems more important than the appearance of the body or the physical attractiveness of the performer. The performer's body attractiveness is determined by the constitution, anatomical and physiological characteristics, physical strength, fitness and overall appearance of the person (for a more detailed analysis, see Marković, 2017, pp. 79-97). Evolutionary-oriented psychologists (Barber, 1995; Grammer, Fink, Moller & Thornhill, 2003; Singh, 2002) suggest that the attractiveness of male and female bodies is a part of sexual selection that influences men and women to prefer those physical characteristics that are "open signals for genetic quality, health, strength and fertility" (Marković, 2017, p. 85).

Eroticism in the broadest sense can be understood as a metaphor or artistic expression that arouses passion associated with eros and sexual desire (Davis, 2015; Kanaouti & Stewart, 2020). How eroticism is communicated by the dance is still a subject which is insufficiently researched. There are few results within the research of the aesthetic experience of the observer which suggest that eroticism in dance is related to sensuality, passion, beauty and grace, and very often with the expression of sexuality (Christense et al., 2017; Hanna, 1988, 2010; Jaeger, 1997; Maletić, 1986; Vukadinović & Marković, 2012; Vukadinović, 2019).

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are several future research directions which stem from our analyses. In exploration of dance as a medium of communication it would be significant to investigate how the audience understands the content communicated by the dancer. This should include the data on whether there are any factors which influence their understanding, for example knowing personal data about the performer, or knowing in advance which subject he/she will represent through dance. Earlier studies pointed out that the audience's understanding of the content plays an important role in their evaluation of dance (Vukadinović, 2019).

Moreover, it would be interesting to empirically test the understanding of the expression of a person who dances spontaneously as well as of those who express themselves through dance as an art form. It would also be significant to see in which of those cases a person can communicate him/herself more precisely, and also what variables affect that expression. Furthermore, the question of what differentiates individual dance and dance in pairs in relation to creative self-expression, socializing, body attractiveness and eroticism should be addressed. Additionally, there is the question of if a particular dance form with its specific dance technique, complexity, elegance has an influence on creative self-expression, socializing, body attractiveness and eroticism. In terms of eroticism and body attractiveness, it should be investigated if communication through dance can be assessed as intrusive, grotesque, weird or bizarre, as some earlier studies related to perception of the body pointed out (Berrol, 1992; Chase, 1953; Cheng, 2018; Hagendoorn, 2004).

These are just some questions that arose from our analyses. The main accent should be on empirical testing when addressing all these questions in order to check and make exploration more reliable. For such future quests, it is worth mentioning that there are not many standardized psychometric instruments which can be used to assess different aspects of people's dance experience. Vukadinović and Marković (2012) constructed an instrument with which aesthetic experience of dance could be assessed. It measures three dimensions of aesthetic experience of dance: Dynamism, Exceptionality and Affective Evaluation. Maraz and collaborators (Maraz et al., 2015) constructed Dance Motivation Inventory (DMI), which measures eight motivational factors for social dancing: Fitness, Mood Enhancement, Intimacy, Socializing, Trance, Mastery, Self-confidence and Escapism. Furthermore, there is Goldsmiths Dance Sophistication Index (Gold-DSI), which measures individual differences in active and passive dance experience (Rose, Müllensiefen, Lovatt, & Orgs, 2020). There is also an important instrument which measures audience's physical experience while watching dance constructed by Vukadinović and Marković (2022), which consists of two scales. The first one measures the observers' physical experience when watching dance by assessing three dimensions: Action Tendency, Arousal and Relaxation. The second measures the observers' kinesthetic responses when watching dance, by assessing Focus, Excitement and Embodied Anticipation. However, to the best of our knowledge, at this moment, there is no standardized psychometric instrument which could be used for measuring the aspects of dance related to the communication of the performer's self, his or her creativity, body attractiveness, or any other segment of communication through dance (e.g. understanding the message which dance conveys or attribution of the meaning to dance). In that sense, the construction of such an instrument would represent an important future direction.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Most recent studies related to dance have shown that research in dance may be categorized in such a way that dance may be studied when it is used as a tool or explored as a topic (Rose et al., 2020). When dance is studied as a tool, researchers apply principles from dance choreography to study motor learning, emotion perception, body awareness, personality, creativity and divergent thinking (Bläsing, 2015; Christensen, Gaigg, & Calvo-Merino, 2018; Christensen, Gomila, Gaigg, Sivarajah, & Calvo-Merino, 2016; Lovatt, 2018; Vukadinović, 2019). Moreover, exploring expertise in dance (e.g. professional dancers, non-dancers) enabled a better understanding of neural mechanisms of action observation and its evaluation (Cross & Ticini, 2012; Jola, Davis, & Haggard, 2011; Orlandi, Zani, & Proverbio, 2017). As a tool, dance is used and explored in therapy, psychotherapy and rehabilitation of various mental and physical health issues. For example, it has been shown that dancing improves the well-being and physical form, enhances the mood and boosts self-confidence (Barreiro & Furnham, 2019; Maraz et al., 2015). On the other hand, when dance is studied as a topic, researchers explore dance in relation to culture and cultural arte-facts, or as a part of religious and other rituals (Lovatt, 2018; Rose et al., 2020; Vukadinović, 2019). It has been noted that as such dance has important functional role in group formation and communication (Christensen et al., 2017; Von Zimmermann, Vicary, Sperling, Orgs, & Richardson, 2018). In our analyses, we have approached dance both as a topic and as a tool of communication.

It can be concluded that the possibility for approaching dance as a tool as well as a topic, and consequently for such a wide range of studies related to dance as a medium of communication stems from its specifics. Among the most important ones is the universality of dance, which makes it accessible to be the subject of study of various disciplines. Given

that dance exists independently of the meridian or social order, that it is related to people of all ages regardless of gender or any other determinant, the universality of dance suggests its archetypal nature visible through motivators that has inspired people to dance since prehistory (Džadžević, 2005; Maletić, 1986; Vukadinović, 2016, 2017). Among these specific traits of dance, its multifunctionality stands out because it combines communicative and integrative, aesthetic, educational, social and even "healing" function (Džadžević, 2005; Maletić, 1986). Properties such as temporal and spatial specificity and synchronization allow the structural analyses of both spontaneous and artistic dance (Brown, Martinez, & Parsons, 2006; Laban, 1960; Luck & Sloboda, 2009; Hutchinson-Guest, 1979; Repp & Penel, 2004). The characteristic that the dancer is at the same time the subject and the object of dance distinguishes this art from all other artistic disciplines (Arnhajm, 2003; Vukadinović & Marković, 2012). Dance as a work of art has a real and concrete existence, it requires an audience, even if the audience is the creator, and therefore represents a bridge between internal and external, between the experience of the audience and the experience of the creator (Schaverien, 2005). As such, dance represents a highly potent medium of communication. It holds great importance for a person since, as a specific medium of communication it provides the possibility for self-expression, healing, the acquisition of new skills and the achievement of freedom through which one can express the entire potential of his personality. No matter the way in which it is practiced (as a form of art, recreation or entertainment), as a medium of communication dance enables its performers to satisfy various desires and fulfill high value standards such as authenticity and creativity. General well-being, good physical shape, the feeling of strength and freedom of movement and experience of one's own beauty are just some of the supporting reasons why an individual chooses to dance. It is not only a complex, multifunctional and multidimensional phenomenon, but it is also a mediator of important biological and psychological functions of people. As such, dance is a realm of existence that facilitates creative adventure for those who engage in it.

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