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# Understanding "Dance Understanding"

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The history of dance offers us two opposing traditions with respect to the cognitive standing of dance with respect to its contribution to understanding. One view expressed by two characters in Lucian’s *Peri Orcheosis* is not very complimentary. In Lucian’s treatise, Crato ridicules his friend Lycinus for watching a “girlish fellow play the wanton with dainty clothing and bawdy songs”. Another character, Demetrius the Cynic, dismisses dance as a mere adjunct to music and silk vestments consisting of meaningless, idle movements.<sup>1</sup> A less extreme, though equally damaging view, is implicit in Hegel’s decision to omit dance from the canon of major art forms in his philosophy of art.

The opposite tradition finds endorsement in Claude François Menestrier’s Seventeenth century treatise on dance, *Ballets in Classical Antiquity and in Modern Times*. Menestrier, a French philosopher and choreographer, argued that ballet reflects more in the way of understanding than its sister arts of music, painting, and poetry. Any advance in the cognitive status of dance found in Menestrier’s claim depends on whether the understanding provided by ballet translates into a significant contribution to knowledge, as well as on the cognitive standing given to these other arts. Both of these issues will become clearer later on as the views of Hegel and Menestrier are subjected to further scrutiny.

Among contemporary philosophers who have shown an interest in dance, Nelson Goodman and Francis Sparshott both recognize the contributions of dance to human understanding. Goodman includes dance, along with languages and the other fine arts, as important symbol systems, and Sparshott has argued that dance is one of the central expressions of human culture.

Let us examine the views of these philosophers as a basis for developing some further thoughts on the subject. I take as a given that dance is a form of cultural activity capable of organizing human experience into knowledge and that a distinction must be made between two types of knowledge, *Erlebnis* and *Erkenntnis*. *Erlebnis* is knowledge arising through inner lived experience of the dance, while *Erkenntnis* is knowledge of dance acquired from description and interpretation of it as in the responses of audiences, and the work of critics and aesthetic theorists and dance historians. I will argue that dance has made noteworthy contributions to cognitive understanding, and will discuss some of the problems that have hindered

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian, “The Dance”, *Dance Index* I (1942), 105, 106.

appreciation of its cognitive role. I will focus the discussion on dance as a theatrical presentation.

Like all forms of dance, theatrical dance is rooted in the human body as the center of the dance experience; culturally specific practices define the unique modes of its various embodiments. Thus, theater dance takes a wide variety of forms including ballets based on choreographed systems of movement enhanced with music, costumes, and stage sets, as well as contemporary improvisational dance. The latter substitutes open form for preset movement structures, and replaces the proscenium stage with non-traditional performing spaces.

Theater dance serves a variety of purposes ranging from entertainment to explorations through movement of experimental aesthetic concerns and social issues. Typically, theater dance entails a physical as well as a conceptual separation of performers from audience, although the line between performer and audience is sometimes blurred. By the physical separation I refer to dancers moving on a stage or in another performing space, with the audience seated in a separate space while observing the performance. The dancers articulate works for the audience in accordance with the conventions established in the choreography and in the environment of theatrical costumes, sets, sound and lighting, and other stage props. There is an implicit contract between performers and audience which presumes certain common knowledge of the cultural conventions on which an understanding of dance is based and which allows for communication of the meaning.

This is not to say that there are not grounds for questioning the significance of dance in the larger scheme of human symbolism. For example, the skepticism expressed by Lucian's characters conveys a view of dance that is still shared by some members of the intellectual community and by segments of the general public. Dance writers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, who emphasized physical movement over style, dance history, and aesthetics also contributed to this sort of skepticism. Even so able a critic as Marcia Siegel wrote in 1970: "Dance is a physical art, and I think the over-intellectualized kind of writing where the writer detaches himself from all sensory. . . and emotional connotations is just about worthless."<sup>2</sup> Similar anti-intellectual views of dance were expressed by Martin Gottfried, another critic. Writing about the same time as Siegel, he stated, "I think the whole idea of research is very sterilizing and very antagonistic to life. I think the theater exists only in life, living people on stage".<sup>3</sup> While one agrees that critics should focus on the dance itself, it is easy to conclude from such remarks that dance has no relevance to the intellectual life. Also contributing to dance's precarious intellectual standing has been the tendency of practitioners, including performers and dance

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<sup>2</sup> Marcia Siegel, "Two Views of Dance," *Arts in Society* VIII (1971), 673.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Gottfried, "Journalistic Resources," *Proceedings of the Second Conference on Research in Dance* (Warrenton, Virginia, 1969), 81, 85.

educators, to focus selectively on the physical and emotive aspects of dance while neglecting cognitive-intellectual features, or failing to explore and explain the body's role in understanding.

There are perhaps other reasons to question the contribution of dance to thought. Some have questioned dance's independent identity, an issue raised in Lucian's treatise where it is linked with bawdy songs and wanton. That dance has never been the culturally central form of expression in any major civilization, as was architecture in ancient Egypt or sculpture in classical Greece, or painting in Renaissance Italy, has also raised doubts about its significance for human understanding. Only at the local or tribal level has dance participated significantly in the self-definition of a community, or perhaps for a brief moment at the European court of a French king in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This consideration, among others, led Hegel to omit dance from his pantheon of the major fine arts. Similarly, there have been no major spokes-persons for dance in the culture comparable to Michelangelo, Leonardo, Shakespeare, or Bach, at least not ones who have entered into public consciousness outside the small circle of dance.

Concurrently, there *is* a lively philosophical tradition that recognizes and seeks to account for the role of dance as a mode of learning and of transmitting knowledge. Francis Sparshott, in his book, *Off the Ground*, argues that dance *is* a culturally central entity because it is a mode of self-knowledge, a means of a community's self-definition, and because it is a manifestation of mind.<sup>4</sup> Without limiting our inquiry, it will be useful to keep these criteria in mind. Further, it will be useful to consider what forms the knowledge discovered through dance might take and what issues and questions might benefit from the insights provided by dance. Would this knowledge be reflective and articulate as verbal language is? Should we look to dance for aid in the understanding of human communication? Will the benefits of dance knowledge be available universally to the public, or are they limited to knowledgeable members of the community of dancers, artists, and scholars? If we find that dance is a great popular educator, might that alter how dance is practiced or its status as an art? For instance, would the greater extension of dance into non-artistic dimensions of life lessen its artistic development or its overall cultural impact?

*Menestrier: Ballet is entertainment for the mind, the ear, and the eye*

Menestrier, himself a ballet master and choreographer as well as a Jesuit philosopher writing on the fine arts, asserts in his treatise on dance that, despite many centuries devoted to our understanding through the arts, dance (ballet) has been badly neglected by philosophers. He builds upon philosophical writers from Plato and Aristotle up to those of his own time, as well as his extensive personal knowledge of the repertoire of existing ballets and his experiences as a choreographer, to explain the purposes of the ballet. Menestrier provides

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Sparshott, *Off the Ground* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 44.

a normative structure, consisting of rules for making ballets and, to facilitate its conceptual purposes, a type of symbol scheme. The so-called rules apply to five essential elements of a ballet: invention, the form or way in which the choreographer structures the ballet; characters; movements; decoration, consisting of costumes and sets; and harmony which is the result of all parts of the ballet working together.<sup>5</sup> His scheme is of interest not so much for its normative function in defining dance (ballet) but for his efforts to construct a conceptual framework to enable dance (ballet) to function alongside alternative symbolic frameworks. His treatise attempts to show how dance contributes to human understanding.

Ballet, according to Menestrier, is an imitative art that interprets the passions and internal feelings, together with the external actions of man, through bodily movements (Sect. 41, 43). In this view, ballet is a metaphorical action that reveals the nature of things, including states of the soul. This, he argues, cannot be sensibly perceived except through movements. Ballet, according to Menestrier, thus seeks to reach the mind and imagination, and is not thus confined to the merely sensory. Rather, ballet seeks to engage the whole person, including the mind, the ear, and the eye by linking movements to a story or idea augmented by music, costumes, and theater design. It requires more discipline than abstract dancing, or dancing for the sake of dancing, which involves simply moving the body from place to place according to certain rhythms.

How does Menestrier's theory advance the place of dance as a form of human understanding? First, it is useful to look at his views in context. In philosophical terms, his is a neo-Aristotelian view of the world in which representational symbols provide access to the essence of persons and other elements of the external world. Also implicit in his views is a particular stage in the development of theater dance. Still, his attempt to locate dance in the main conceptual framework of his time represents a serious effort to address the question of dance as a primary form of understanding. It recognizes dance as a serious intellectual enterprise and compares it favorably to other cultural enterprises including painting and music, as well as to philosophy. It rightly cites movement of the human body as the principal element in dance and attempts to link dance movement or action to the solution of key intellectual problems, namely how we can know the workings of the inner life and their relation to external actions. Of course, Menestrier's proposals reflect their period, but it is not necessary to subscribe to all that Menestrier's world view assumes, or to defend his claims for dance, to recognize his views as an important historical precedent for our undertaking. His theory is one of many possible schemes for analyzing a ballet, or other dance. Many alternative schemes have since been put forward, and many of them radically depart from Menestrier's conceptions. But the evolution of new models does not in itself diminish the importance of his efforts to

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<sup>5</sup> Claude François Menestrier, S. J., *Des ballets anciens et modernes selon les règles du théâtre* (Paris, 1682).

establish for dance a conceptual framework where it might be examined along with other conceptual schemes with respect to its contributions to human understanding.

### *Hegel and the Dance*

Hegel's writings on dance in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century occur within the context of his own philosophical system, and mainly appear in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which provides a definitive context for his treatment of the fine arts. Like Plato and Menestrier before him, he represents the arts as forms of reflective activity. According to Hegel, the arts are one of the types of human activities, together with religion and philosophy, required for full self-realization. The arts are a product of Spirit, and are part of human efforts to actualize freedom and learn about the kinds of creatures we are. On a metaphysical level, they create a link between cosmic Spirit, human subjective creativity, and the material world. On another level, art works articulate community values and give meaning to the temporal events of history. Hence for Hegel, as for Menestrier, it is not a question of whether dance can be regarded as a form of cultural understanding, but rather how does it compare to other such forms. In ranking poetry, a verbal art, as the highest art form, in his scheme of artistic symbols, Hegel creates a fundamental problem and aims a potentially fatal blow at the claim that dance contributes to human understanding in any notable way. He takes the view, which has prevailed throughout intellectual history, that "human action cannot in general be understood without the speech that articulates its intent".<sup>6</sup> His reasons for elevating poetry above the other arts are grounded in a belief that language is a superior medium for self-understanding and for articulating the mind itself.

Unfortunately, with Hegel dance loses the elevated status that it was accorded in Menestrier's scheme. His failure to include dance among the major categories of arts — architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry — effectively leaves dance as among the least of the fine arts along with the lesser arts such as landscape architecture. Hegel's ranking of dance has undoubtedly contributed to its neglect and raised doubt about its contributions to human understanding. Why is dance positioned so low in Hegel's scheme? Is it because Hegel sees other arts as important to human understanding and fails to see how dance is? He certainly believed that the fine arts, together with religion and philosophy, are meant to serve human self-understanding as well as understanding of the world. Hegel apparently considered dance too closely bound to the body, and thus to the sensuous material world, to be effective for communicating rational self-understanding. He found dance insufficiently disengaged from unconscious natural bodily processes to function as a stable form of human symbolism. While

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<sup>6</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 34, 40.

dance could express life in its immediacy, it lacked the necessary stability to express human understanding sufficient for a major place in his ranking of the arts.

Given that Hegel ranks the arts according to their suitability for expressing reflective spiritual content, this suggestion cannot be dismissed. Indeed, Hegel lived in a world where reason was the main element for validating an action. This was a world very different from the anti-rationalist intellectual environment of late 20<sup>th</sup> century's postmodern thought, where emotions and bodily actions often challenge reason as the main components of human experience. For Hegel these elements were present in human experience but subordinate to reason.

Perhaps Hegel saw the range and importance of what was portrayed through dance as too limited. Given that his writings on the arts are based on a merger of observed practices in history and his own philosophical concepts, it would have been difficult for Hegel to give dance a prominent role without convincing examples on which to draw. The types of dance that were available for viewing apparently emphasized spectacle and technique and often gave prominence to the dancers' personalities over substantive ideas. Hegel himself remarked on the vacuous state of dance in which pantomime is lost in meaningless technical skill.<sup>7</sup> His view is succinctly expressed in these words: "We do not dance in order to think about what we are doing; interest is restricted to the dance and the tasteful charming solemnity of its beautiful movement."<sup>8</sup>

The ballet of his time after the *Ballet d'action* of J. G. Noverre did not develop its promised reforms of formalistic dancing, Salvatore Vigano's *choreodramas*, and similar work of other choreographers did not assure Hegel of the viability of dance as an important art form.<sup>9</sup> He would have missed the emergence of romantic ballet after the 1830s. (Hegel wrote his aesthetics during the 1820s.) Fundamentally, Hegel found the dance available to him dance lacking in spiritual expression and bordering on intellectual poverty. Thus, dance for Hegel lacked the symbolic power to make sense of human lives or their communities and failed to express or address the highest levels of the human mind. It falls short of Hegel's requirement that art must advance the self-civilizing processes of human culture.

### *Twentieth Century Views*

Doubts about the intellectual contributions of dance persisted in the academy, if not in society at large, well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Yet there are signs that dance is being taken more seriously. For example, interest in western theater dance soared during

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<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, translation of Hegel's *Ästhetik* (1835) by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1192. See also Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 33-45 for further analysis of Hegel's views on dance.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 495.

<sup>9</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 33.

the 1970s and '80s as the works of innovators within the tradition of ballet and beyond produced new forms of dance. Dance in the university moved from the physical education department to that of fine arts and scholars from many disciplines began to write about dance. At the same time the standards for scholarship in dance history improved to the point where the Society for Dance History Scholars was admitted to the American Council of Learned Societies in 1997. This event was followed in 1998 by the publication of the first *International Encyclopedia of Dance*. Admission to this body of academic societies signaled a new recognition of the place of dance in intellectual life. One might argue that granting dance the status of membership in this prestigious group of scholarly societies constitutes recognition equivalent to its inclusion in a major classifications of the arts, thus offsetting the effects of Hegel and others who had not previously validated the contributions of dance to human understanding. Similarly, philosophers such as Nelson Goodman and Francis Sparshott have initiated a reassessment of the cognitive importance of dance and its place in human understanding that warrants attention.

#### *Nelson Goodman on Dance*

The American philosopher Nelson Goodman, whose *Languages of Art* (1967) and other essays on the arts provided a new program for aesthetics based on his theory of symbols, was keenly interested in the dance. During the 1970s, he was director of the Dance Center at Harvard. Later, in the 1980's Goodman conceived and actively participated in the production of *Hockey Seen*, a dance performance made in collaboration with the American choreographer Martha Gray, the composer John Adams, and the visual artist Katharine Sturgis. *Hockey Seen* was performed at Harvard in 1972 and in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium in 1980.<sup>10</sup> More important for our purposes, Goodman recognized dance among the major art forms and provided for its cognitive role in his theory of the arts. Goodman thus invites consideration of dance, together with the other arts, as partners with the sciences in the pursuit of understanding. According to Goodman, dance performances, together with pictures, musical performances, literary texts, films, and buildings, shape our experiences just as do verbal language and scientific symbols.

Goodman's new program for aesthetics analyzes the various art forms, including dance, according to their symbolic features, in order to demonstrate their contributions to human understanding and communication. Cognitive activity, whether in the arts or the sciences, represents "symbol processing: inventing, applying, interpreting, transforming, and

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<sup>10</sup> The rights and certain elements including drawings of Katharine Sturgis, masks, slides, and a film were given to the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA from the estate of Nelson Goodman upon his death in 1998.



manipulating symbols and symbol systems".<sup>11</sup> Representation, expression, and exemplification are the main types of symbolism Goodman uses to characterize the cognitive features and functions of the arts. These types of symbolism are differentiated according to clusters of syntactic and semantic characteristics such as syntactic density, semantic density, and exemplification.<sup>12</sup> For example, syntactic density, which refers to the number of symbols and the nature of their ordering in an entire scheme, is used to differentiate dense representational systems from articulate notational systems. And semantic density, which pertains to the number of references and the nature of their ordering in a symbol scheme, is used to differentiate ordinary languages from notational systems such as music. On the other hand, exemplification is a type of reference which runs from a sample, such as a dance movement, to the label denoting it, for example a feeling of sadness. Exemplification applies to expressive as well as abstract, non-verbal symbols.

The main point of Goodman's analysis of dance and other symbols is to show that their purpose is "cognition in and for itself" driven by intellectual curiosity and aimed toward enlightenment. His criteria for artistic symbols subordinate aesthetic excellence to cognitive excellence, which means that dance and other the arts share the same standards as cognitive excellence in science. Symbolization in the dance then "is to be judged fundamentally by how well it serves the cognitive purpose: by the delicacy of its discriminations and the aptness of its allusions; by the way it works in grasping, exploring, and informing the world; by how it participates in the making, manipulation, retention, and transformation of knowledge".<sup>13</sup> Hence the processes that occur with respect to making a dance: creating and modifying motifs, elaboration of motifs, theme and variation, connecting movements with music, staging, and so forth are all means of achieving cognitive efficacy. Similarly the spectator's experience requires active engagement of the mind and is a process of exploring and discovering the rich and subtle cognitive relationships found in the dance. These cognitive relationships incorporate feelings, as Goodman holds the view that feelings operate cognitively in dance, along with formal patterns and other components.<sup>14</sup> This means that the dance is apprehended through the feeling of a movement operating in conjunction with these other structural elements. Hence he rejects the dichotomy of the cognitive and the emotive in favor of a model that allows for the interplay of all of the different components of an experience.

Goodman's theory of symbols thus provides a model through which to see the possibilities for dance's contributions to human understanding. The particular domain of dance symbols

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1972), 110.

<sup>12</sup> Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, 111. Goodman also uses these concepts to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic symbols.

<sup>13</sup> Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, 115.

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, 107.

is movement of the human body. Typically the movements are orchestrated within the parameters of a system of movement provided by a tradition such as classical ballet or one of the newer systems developed during the past century. Some dances use denotative symbols, which can be replaced by verbal instructions or descriptions of familiar activities and events. For instance, a Renaissance ballet that represents the movement of the planets could in theory be replaced by a scientist's description of planetary movement. Other dances, says Goodman, exemplify rhythms and dynamic shapes, which do not relate easily to the familiar. Yet these experiences also heighten awareness of ourselves or the world and awaken curiosity inviting exploration and discovery. Such symbols reorganize experience and introduce distinctions not previously understood. The vocabulary for understanding ourselves and our worlds evolves as a result of such experiences.<sup>15</sup> The process is most dynamically evident when one is involved in creating a dance, or in experiencing a performance firsthand. But the discoveries of such moments are cumulative and connect with ongoing experiences, much in the sense that John Dewey proposed in his book, *Art as Experience*.

Has Goodman's reconceptualization of the cognitive role of dance offset the damage done by Hegel? Goodman shows the common ground that exists among symbols in the arts and other domains by recognizing their symbolic nature and allows for differences in types of symbolism and their functioning in pursuing a common goal of understanding. There is no hierarchy among types of symbols apart from their suitability for providing greater or lesser distinctions and the enrichment of knowledge. In this respect, dance is more or less equal with respect to the other arts and non-artistic symbolism as to its potential contributions to understanding. Similarly, Goodman's aesthetic theory allows for differences based on pragmatic considerations such as functional efficacy rather than metaphysics.

### *Sparshott on the Contributions of Dance to Understanding*

Francis Sparshott, in two monumental works on dance, *Off the Ground* (1988) and *A Measured Pace* (1995), has attempted to provide a philosophical basis for exploring in depth the role of dance in human experience. Sparshott reflects upon dance as a central form of expression in the lives of human perpetrators of culture. This is another way of phrasing the question of dance's contributions to human understanding. Although Sparshott's analysis covers many aspects of dance, the focus here will be on the art of theater dance. According to Sparshott, the core requirements for an art such as dance consist of practitioners, an interested public, and organizations that maintain, transmit, and promote the art.<sup>16</sup> His focus is upon dance as

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<sup>15</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1968), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 110.

a type of organization of knowledge and skills grounded in a cultural practice, rather than as a particular kind of symbolism.

There are two main elements in Sparshott's approach: dance as a practice and dance as a means of transformation of the person dancing. First, dance exists as a practice when persons knowingly engage in bodily movements with a recognizable form that can be identified by conventions such as values expressed in rules, standards, or ideals. That is, dance as a practice entails the following: that someone is dancing, that dancing allows for a theory of dancing, and that someone knows when she is dancing. Theory provides a "reflective identification" of the activity and a "structure of intention" sufficient to enable interested persons to knowingly participate, or to enable spectators, including theorists, to knowingly reflect casually or with analytic and critical intent on the activity, and to compare the activity with other cultural practices.<sup>17</sup> The concept of dance practices thus provides the means for choreographers and dancers to engage in making dances and performing them. For our purposes dance practices offer a focus for considering dance's contributions to human understanding. In this context, theater dance will be seen as one type of symbolic activity, which varies according to cultural, including ethnic and stylistic, diversity.

Sparshott argues that dance, when done for its own sake, can substantially change the dancer's being.<sup>18</sup> "Transformation" refers to what happens during the course of dancing itself as something different from other kinds of engagement. What are the special features of this extraordinary dance experience? Endotelicity (precluding any ends other than the activity itself); an emphasis on the quality of the dancing; the appropriateness of dance movements, the space, and the costumes to the occasion; and the fact that dancing consists of the special movements of the dancer's own body as a whole.<sup>19</sup> The latter is the most important consideration. Transformation is transitory, and, at the end of the dance, the dancer again becomes a person in the workaday world. The dance state is perhaps analogous to a state of religious ecstasy. Here, Sparshott argues that the deepest meanings of dance are analogous to the deepest kinds of self-transformation. His view is grounded in the assumption that the use of the body in the non-utility-based actions of dance is somehow contributory to the human spirit in ways that other artistic and non-artistic activities are not. In the end, Sparshott's idea of transformation is linked to a philosophical view concerning what it means to be human. The body as merely an animated mechanism is rejected in favor of the notion of "the body as conscious corporeality or corporeal consciousness, and the equation of the latter with being human".

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<sup>17</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 114, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 342-344, and Francis Sparshott, *A Measured Pace: Toward a Philosophical Understanding of the Art of Dance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 5 & 95-97.

<sup>19</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 343.

Is Sparshott's concept transformation *an*, or even *the*, answer to the problem of dance and understanding? Intuitively one is sympathetic to Sparshott's line of reasoning, for it does appear that something special happens when one dances, both in the theater and outside. But transformation, whatever its contribution might be, affects only the dancers. Yet theater dance is meant to be seen and must be interpreted before meaning can be attached to it for any other than the choreographer and the performers. How is this experience transmitted to spectators and to others capable of linking the understanding of dance to knowledge in other fields?

Sparshott is aware of the need to bridge the gap between what the dancer knows in doing and what the spectator knows by seeing, and devotes several pages of *Off the Ground* to surveying various options for addressing this question.<sup>20</sup> For example, Sparshott considers and rejects empathy theory that provides for a sympathetic transfer of the experience undergone in the body of the dancer to the spectator. He objects that self-transformation "was not a matter of feeling, kinesthetic or other but a matter of one's construction of the world of one's action and of oneself in it".<sup>21</sup> Sparshott shifts the discussion to "what dance is" without revealing how the dancer's transformation passes to the spectator. From this discussion we learn some of the requirements for a spectator's seeing a dance: background knowledge sufficient to provide a system of interpretation, the means to articulate the dancer's movements into meaningful elements of phrases, and the ability to tell what to look at. But transformation for the spectator remains elusive.

Sparshott's analysis takes us a certain way toward seeing how dance might contribute to human understanding and might be related to other conceptual frameworks. Yet he leaves us only at the threshold. The idea of transformation is only briefly sketched and that in terms of the dancer's experience. There is inadequate explanation of how this experience passes from the performer to the spectator, or of how the symbols generated through a dance performance would function cognitively for the spectators. For instance, how does the transforming experience affect ordinary life? Is it a factor in aesthetic enjoyment, or does it bear on fulfillment of one's moral commitments? Furthermore, Sparshott does not provide a sufficient account of how the experiences of the choreographers and performers differ from other manifestations of dance understanding as experienced by spectators, critics, and theorists. Nor is there sufficient account of how the experiences of the choreographers' and performers' experiences might differ from other manifestations of dance understanding, for spectators, critics, and theorists.

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<sup>20</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 354 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Sparshott, *Off the Ground*, 356.

*Final Section*

How can we advance beyond Menestrier, Hegel, Goodman, and Sparshott?<sup>22</sup> I begin with some assumptions concerning cognition as a process leading to human understanding. First, cognition includes learning, knowing, gaining insight, and understanding by all available means. I also assume — and here I am in agreement with Goodman and others — that the range of human symbols holding cognitive significance includes all of the arts. This view is shared by Rudolf Arnheim, Susanne Langer, and Howard Gardner, who have conducted extensive research on the arts and human development. Arguments in support of the view that dance is made up of cognitive symbols have already been considered. I shall now focus on cognition and the distinction between performances and responses to performances.

Performances and responses to them, such as the audience member's immediate response, criticism, and aesthetic theory represent important modes of dance — related cognition. The distinction between performance and response draws attention to two different aspects of knowledge as reflected in the German words, *Erlebnis* and *Erkenntnis*. *Erlebnis*, which is sometimes referred to as *knowledge by acquaintance*, is knowledge attained through inner lived experiences of dancers in the process of performing and also the inner lived experiences of first hand observers in direct contact with the performance.<sup>23</sup> It is an ordered, intelligible symbolic process through which the agent or producer undergoes the experience of performing, sends out information to the audience, and is also the receiver of information concerning the process itself and the meaning of its symbols. *Erkenntnis* is *knowledge about* something and consists of description and interpretation. It is “outer world” knowledge based on observation and reasoning processes such as association, comparison, appeals to prior knowledge, and judgment. Knowledge in the form of *Erkenntnis* may, under some circumstances, serve as a “mental” substitute for the object or event. The difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erkenntnis* is further clarified by Gilbert Ryle's distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that* in the sense that *Erlebnis* involves a practical knowledge of how to dance, or how to see it from a first perspective based on the viewer's own lived experiences of how it feels to dance, as opposed to “outer” knowledge about the dance based on remembering, reflection, judging, or other forms of analytical reasoning. The difference is between practice and theory. It is not merely one of subjective versus objective, because the dancer's

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<sup>22</sup> Curtis L. Carter, “Arts and Cognition: Performance, Criticism, and Aesthetics”, *Art Education*, 36 (1983), 61-67.

<sup>23</sup> I base my account of *Erlebnis* in part on Wilhelm Dilthey's discussion of lived experiences which include willing and knowing in the formation of understanding. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works I, Introduction to the Human Sciences*, edited by Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). See also, Jos de Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life*, ch. 7, translated by Anthony Burrett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

performance is a form of realizing consciousness for her/himself as well as for the viewers who then objectify the experience in their own conscious bodies.

It is my intent here to use these two forms of knowledge to advance the discussion. In the case of dance, however, description or interpretation seldom, if ever, amounts to an exhaustive characterization of the work. It is necessary to supplement *Erkenntnis* with *Erlebnis*, which is supplied by seeing, hearing, or undergoing, as in the case of performing, in the actual presence of the dance work. My aim is not, therefore, to propose that *Erkenntnis* and *Erlebnis* constitute a dualism of knowledge with respect to dance. There are in fact elements of both at work in a dance performance and in the responses to it. The dancer brings to the performance a substantial knowledge about dance (*Erkenntnis*) including a system of formalized training and the formal structure of the choreography being executed. At the same time, she/he discovers and reveals to the audience an individualized presence that can only be experienced at a particular moment of performance (*Erlebnis*). According to Gardner, the typical audience member observing dance is likely to be engaged primarily in terms of affective reactions, including feelings, tension, or resolution, or in terms of the ideas suggested in the work, rather than by the formal means. In this instance, the type of dance understanding consists primarily of *Erlebnis*.<sup>24</sup> But this depends on the amount of knowledge that the spectator brings to the dance experience, which can vary greatly. It is difficult to say precisely what elements affect the audience's involvement. Among factors to be considered are the audience's awareness that the dance work is projecting elements of the choreographer's ideas and that the dancer is projecting some aspects of his/her unique personal qualities, as well as the audience's understanding of the style of the performance.

A critic responding to a performance receives his/her initial impressions in the moment of observing a performance, that is, as *Erlebnis*, but a critic goes beyond the audience to engage in reflection, description, and interpretation (*Erkenntnis*) which enables him/her to link the evaluation of the work to particular features of the performance. His interpretation requires additional study, comparison of works and performances, drawing upon a repertory of prior knowledge of dance, and communicating in words the results to others.

Aesthetics refers primarily to philosophical responses to the arts and is a form of *Erkenntnis*. It provides the concepts and principles necessary for identifying dance works and determining their constituent properties as reflected in the works of writers cited previously in this text. A theory of dance thus provides the concepts and principles necessary for identifying and appreciating performances, as well as for the development of criticism, and for relating

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Gardner, *The Arts and Human Development* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), 323 & 324.

knowledge available through dance to knowledge as it exists in other cultural forms as found in the humanities and the sciences.

It is useful to examine more closely how *Erlebnis* and *Erkenntnis* apply, respectively, to the tasks of performers, critics, and aesthetics theorists. My thoughts on performance are guided in part by conversations with two ballet dancers and two modern dancers who were asked to describe their own experiences of performing and by various theoretical studies. A dance performance occurs within an established system of movement with its own rules and conventions for creating dances. Even improvisational dance practices follow certain conventions within which improvisation occurs. Once the system is internalized, the performer is able to join with a choreographer and other dancers in its creative uses. The principal elements in a performance from the dancer's point of view are the movements called for in the choreography or invented through improvisation. The dancer then draws upon his/her own skills to execute the movements with the right qualities of shape, line, proportion, and feeling. A sense of movement style in accordance with the overall intent of the piece is also required.

Among the various factors necessary to accomplish the performance, kinesthetic intelligence appears to exercise a dominant role. Kinesthetic intelligence is a kind of spatial intelligence that operates through the muscles and includes muscle memory. Psychologists refer to it as the sensory system which controls all bodily movement and orients the moving body in space.<sup>25</sup> Kinesthetic intelligence provides the dancer with an immediate awareness of the position of the body in space. It also registers the characteristics of movement, including rate, extent, and duration, in all the different parts — muscles, joints, tendons — throughout the body. Kinesthetic intelligence is thus a key element in enabling the dancer to learn the movements of a dance. Like other aspects of human intelligence, it is a flexible capacity capable of being directed to any number of different systems for creating dances.

As it is with other forms of cognitive behavior, mind has a central role in the execution of a dance performance. But mind in this sense is really the intelligent, conscious body acting as the controlling force that coordinates all of the various sources that a dancer may draw upon to create a performance (Nietzsche and Merleau Ponty). This includes kinesthetics, feelings and ideas, as well as prior training, choreography, style, and the rich cultural systems that support the dance. Mind thus harmonizes rhythmic spatial qualities of movement with expressive qualities and abstract ideas to create a sense of unity and order in a performance. A ballet dancer has described the role of the mind in a performance with these words: "The

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<sup>25</sup> M. G. Scott, "Measurement of Kinesthesia", *Research Quarterly* 26 (1955), 324-341. Also G. Sage, *Introduction to Motor Behavior: A Neurophysical Approach* (Menlo Park, California: Addison Wesley, 1971).

mind is the controlling center. It enables us to be in command of our bodies, to be concentrated, to bring clarity, and to acquire the right feeling that the movement needs."<sup>26</sup>

The knowledge that a dancer receives through performing a dance includes having a vivid, individualized sense of the work from beginning to end, as well as a sense of its overall shape. The aim and structure of the work as provided by the choreographer are internalized and given shape in the mind and body of the dancer. The mind/body activity of the dancer incorporates abstract relations of space and time, of space and proportion, as well as concrete awareness of the movement phrases and body shapes and their connections in the overall performance. Heightened awareness of relationships between the various parts of the moving body, as well as among the dancers working together in a performance, results in a state of "thinking in movement". Following Merleau Ponty, and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, the movement becomes the presence of thought.<sup>27</sup> From this brief overview, it is apparent that dance performance represents an enormously complex set of cognitive operations requiring attention to several different domains. *Erlebnis* requires that we consider kinesthetic processes, feelings, and ideas, all in relation to movement. While *Erlebnis* appears to be the primary feature of knowledge considered from the point of view of the performer, a performance can also function as symbol for communicating ideas and feelings. Hence, through movement, a performance may present knowledge about something other than itself, as when the movement tells an edifying story or imitates the movements of the planets. In such instances, the performance approaches *Erkenntnis*, but this does not seem to be its primary function. Because the producer is also the receiver of the knowledge given in the performance, the dancer is in a unique position with respect to knowledge. As the producer, the dancer is in a position to share in the discoveries that unfold during the creative process; as the receiver, he/she also aware of the outcome that is shared with audiences, critics, and theorists.

While a dancer's knowledge may include what has been discovered during the creative process, there are apparent differences between the knowledge experienced directly by the producer and knowledge as it appears to the audience, and in criticism and aesthetic theory. The audience does not undergo the internal feedback of the performer and typically is not on the same level with respect to knowledge of the choreography and training. Rather the audience's knowledge, though firsthand experience, depends on seeing and other sensory and conceptual modes of information, including the kinesthetics, being transmitted and processed by the mind-body systems. The audience's knowledge, as well as that of critics and theorists, predominantly, but in varying degrees, are forms of *Erkenntnis* or knowledge about the

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<sup>26</sup> Ann Marie De Angelo, principal dancer, Jeffrey Ballet, Interview, New York, November, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "Thinking in Movement," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 39:4 (1981), 398-407.



performance. The audience's firsthand experience is heavily imbued with *Erlebnis*, but he/she brings to the work beliefs and theories concerning dance and other matters of culture that are essentially forms of *Erkenntnis*. This is even more so for critics. A critic's experience of dance begins with direct observations, but these experiences are then merged and absorbed into a complex network of verbal description of the movement patterns and expressive qualities found in a particular dance as well as with interpretation which draws on the critic's personal knowledge and institutional practices. On a more abstract level, aesthetic theory offers a philosophical framework for discussing dance, while seeking to improve our thinking not so much about a particular performance, but about the concepts and theories that we apply to theater dance in general.

From the distinctions between *Erlebnis* and *Erkenntnis* offered here, it follows that human potential for learning through dance encompasses these two aspects. *Erlebnis* recognizes knowledge accessible directly through participation in dancing and to directly perceivable knowledge that is communicated in the presence of a dance performance. Knowledge in such instances is transmitted through the formally ordered patterns of a system of dance movements, which includes kinesthetic and expressive features as well as abstract time and space configurations. Knowing a work in the sense of *Erlebnis* is akin to knowing an object through inner sensory and emotive experience, as opposed to knowing the object through words and labels that describe it or through verbal concepts and theories that interpret it. *Erlebnis* does not occur independently of *Erkenntnis* because a performer's or an observer's knowledge are normally informed by prior knowledge about dancing and its place in the culture. Similarly, dance criticism and aesthetic theory as forms of *Erkenntnis* contribute to our knowledge. Criticism provides a record of fact and opinion against which to gauge our own understanding of dance performances and lead us to explore on a deeper level our own initial reactions, thus expanding our knowledge. Aesthetic theory is formed in abstract verbal language and lacks the sensory immediacy of performance itself and direct contact with individual works. It provides the conceptual foundation for establishing the cognitive significance of dance.

Each of these levels of engagement with dance: performance, audience, critic, and aesthetic theorist represent a level of cognitive involvement with dance. If dance is to have a greater role in the cognitive life, it will take place at all of these levels. For the dance producers, the results will be increased self-understanding of dance practices and the pedagogical aspects of teaching and research in the field of dance. For the public, the main vehicles for increased appreciation of the role of dance will be through experiencing performances and through reading what critics have to say. For the intellectual community of theorists and scholars, intensified scholarship aimed at providing intellectual frameworks that allow for interdisciplinary communication of the contributions available through dance will surely widen the understanding of dance itself and its relevance to cultural knowledge in general.

*On-Going Challenges*

Today dance enjoys a renewed life in contemporary cultures and a rich diversity of forms, ranging from dances based on traditional set choreography to improvisational and culturally diverse dance forms. In modernity with its emphasis on the purity of art media, basically all of the arts aspired to communicate without verbal assistance. This was part of a struggle in mid-twentieth century to reinstate the communicative aspects of non-linguistics forms of expression. An increasing emphasis upon pure music without text, abstraction in painting, concrete poetry without reference, and dance that does not tell a story followed. These developments resulted in the emancipation of the different symbol systems including dance, and prepared for new discussions of symbol systems in the manner of Nelson Goodman and others. This development resulted in new possibilities for dance. For example, it meant that gestures and movements are able to communicate a meaning on their own. And the repertory of dance expands in post-modern art as movement combines with video and computer technology.

The constant search for new paradigms in theater dance, while enriching the field, also point to instability in the forms. In its most extreme view, this theme is expressed in Merce Cunningham's words, "I started out with the idea that first of all any kind of movement could be dancing . . . Then I went on to the idea that each dance should be different. That is, what you find for each dance as movement should be different from what you had used in previous dances".<sup>28</sup> Another important development affecting the state of dance has to do with the increased focus on the material elements of the arts, which emerged with post-modernism in the late nineteen seventies. This trend goes against Hegel's prescription in favor of spirit and idea over the material in the development of art, and is a reversal of contemporary conceptual art where ideas or concepts dominate over the material elements in art. Thus, in a kind of reversal of the dialectic, the material has again come into the forefront of the arts. For example, developments in photography, as well as in painting, again emphasize the materiality of the medium. In this context, the materiality of the body, which gave problems to Hegel, actually becomes an advantage, which probably helps to explain why dance has become more popular in the late twentieth century.

Despite notable bursts of creativity and diversity, anyone familiar with the history of dance and its place in education will know that dance's struggle for recognition as a form of knowledge has been ongoing and that its place in education remains to be established on any firm basis.<sup>29</sup> The questions raised in Hegel's incisive critique concerning whether dance

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<sup>28</sup> Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance: Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Lesschaeve* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Curtis L. Carter, "The State of Dance in Education: Past and Present," *Theory Into Practice: Teaching the Arts* XXIII: 4 (1984), 293-299.

measures up to verbal symbols remain open. That is, whether dance is too unstable to serve as a main vehicle of cultural understanding, or whether it is too closely linked to life in its immediacy to have lasting significance.

Even more important, there has been no way of notating theater dance capable of registering it in the public consciousness; whereas, there has been a long-standing traditions of musical notation accessible to the public. This absence continued, at least until the emergence of photography in the late nineteenth century and, film and video in the twentieth century. Apropos of these developments is the parallel between the emergence of photography, film, and video and the rise of dance in the twentieth century. Without the support from these media arts it is unlikely that dance would have received the increasing attention it has enjoyed in the late twentieth century.

Ryle's distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that* helps clarify why dance is so difficult for audience members who lack practical experience of training in theatrical dancing. They are unable to relate what they see or know from secondary sources (outer experience) to their own inner lived experiences. The broader implication is that if you don't have your own lived experience of dance based on knowing how to dance, it is even more difficult to draw on dance for understanding. Dance understanding consists of a process of linking inner personal experiences to matters in outer experiences, including those in which other persons may participate. This process may involve feeling and willing as well as the organizing structures that evolve out of consciousness and are shared through the dance. The situation is different in music where there are long established traditions of people actually making music, in Roland Barthes words, "a muscular music" in which the body not only hears, but also actively transcribes what it reads by making sound and meaning.<sup>30</sup> At least this has been true until recent times, when this tradition of actually playing has been largely replaced by the passive music of the concert, festival, or CD-ROM. The situation is different for poetry, where the poet who writes a poem about death can count on the fact that the readers typically will have had an experience of writing, perhaps even of writing poetry, and also of the feelings associated with death.

Despite these challenges, I believe that dance has been rightfully positioned in this discussion as a notable contribution to human understanding. Here I have attempted to set forth a selection of the models past and present available for addressing the conceptual aspects of dance. The most effective models will include a framework for transforming the bodily-emotive, the kinesthetic as well as the logical components of dance into cultural symbols capable of transmitting meaning. Moreover, they must recognize that dance is continuously reinventing itself, resulting in the absence of the kind of stability expected of verbal languages.

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 149.

Perhaps it *is* dance's greater successes in its uses of the conscious body as a form of self-knowledge and transformation that most distinguishes dance from other vehicles of human understanding. The specifics of working out the details for increasing the cognitive significance of dance must take place in culturally specific settings and will benefit most fully from identification with those world-views most concerned with what it means to be human.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank Jos de Mul of the University of Erasmus in Rotterdam and Yehuda Yannay of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee for their suggestions for clarifying arguments and expanding the discussion of certain points, and Howard Goldfinger for assistance with editing.