Dance Representation

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Although a lengthy tradition in dance theory locates the essence of dance in representation or imitation, postmodern dances such as Merce Cunningham's *Summerspace*, Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*, Trisha Brown's *Primary Accumulation* and Doug Dunn's *Gestures in Red* cast serious doubt on this general theory. These dances lack a narrative structure, and they do not employ standard story-telling theatrical conventions; in short, they are not representations. In spite of the fact that a general theory of dance is not baseable on representation, it is still important to elucidate the nature and range of representation in dance, and these are my aims in this brief paper.

Let us start with a dance that everyone would agree is representational: *Billy the Kid*. A story-telling ballet. *Billy the Kid* represents sequences of events and acts in the life of Billy: his witnessing the killing of his mother, his act of killing her killer, how he becomes an outlaw; is then captured, escapes, and is finally killed by Pat Garrett. The representationalism in *Billy the Kid* is largely based on represented actions. We have to take a simplified example, dancer William Carter representing Sheriff Pat Garrett drawing his pistol to shoot Billy. Although from the spectator's point of view there is only one sequence of movements seen, logically speaking the representation of an act involves two actions; we have, in this case, William Carter drawing and William Carter representing Sheriff Pat Garrett drawing. In the stringing together of such complex acts the saga of Billy is represented.

The recognition that the performance we are watching is a representation of Billy's life is, in part, based on resemblance, in the sense that resemblance is necessary for representation. If there were no scenes, sequences of events, or actions that resembled the events and actions of Billy's life we would not say that we were presented with a dance that

represents Billy's life. But resemblance is not sufficient for representation for the sequence of actions on the stage may more closely resemble the life and demise of Two-gun Jack, little known desperado who lies buried in Boot Hill Cemetery. There are, however, other factors, such as the title, program notes, costuming, and scenery, upon which represention may also depend; program notes are particularly important in establishing the representation of particular individuals.

If representation in dance is based on convention and resemblance, then realism is based on degree of resemblance. *Billy the Kid* is fairly realistic; there are signature dances for characters, e.g., , the riders have bowed legs and spread elbows, there are realistic scenes in which everyone recognizes that guns are being drawn, and the costumes and sets are realistic. But even here we do not find the degree of realism achieved in some theater and mime; Billy the Kid never danced a pas de deux with his girlfriend. The degree of realism is thinner in most full-evening Romantic ballets, where realism is established at the beginning with mime and character dances as opposed to the white acts which feature pure ballet. In Aston's *Enigma Variations* the resemblances are even more attenuated. The costumes and staging are very realistic and capture Elgar's social milieu, and there are some character dances, but the "Nimrod" variations stick strictly to a classical sequence of arabesques, tombes, and pas de basque. Perhaps some relationship among the trio is represented, but the reference is unclear. And what should we say of a dance such as Balanchine's *Four Temperments* ? John Percival and Don McDonagh regard it as a sequence of character representations; Marcia Siegel demurs from a representational reading.[1] This seems to be a borderline case; if the dance represents it is by vague hints and allusions.

Given that dance representation often occurs via allusions, or hints of resemblance, an understanding of style is important, and sometimes esential, in recognizing resemblances. An example is the pas de deux for a tipsy couple in Christensen's *Filling Station*, as described by Marcia Siegel:" . . . the couple grab for each other and miss, or contact the wrong body parts. They set themselves up for a supported pose, calculate wrong, fall free for an instant, then collapse against each other. The girl achieves a perfect line in arabesque and looks herself into it while the man ducks confusedly under her leg and comes up on the other side, still holding her up. "[2] The resemblance does not obtain between the movements of a typical drunken couple and the dancers' movements, but between the distortions of natural movements we see in a drunken couple and the disto-

rtions in the general ballet style exemplified by the dancers. To see that resemblance one must understand ballet style. Similarly, in *Giselle* the ballerina representing Giselle and the dancer representing Albrecht must be capable of representing a range of emotions in both mime and the classical style. In the waltz scene of the first act their mutual joy is represented by a series of ballone - chasse - coupe, with a beckoning movement by the raised arm on the ballone. Yet the same series repeated by Giselle after she becomes hysterical, and now done a bit tentatively and with some stylistic unevenness, represents her torment and disintegration.[3] In both cases a grasp of the emotional state being represented depends on an understanding of ballet style.

In modern dance, Doris Humphrey's *The Shakers* realistically represents a Shaker dance in terms of floor plan, separation of men and women, and costuming, but it also represents the tensions of Shaker life, the struggle to overcome the gravity of flesh and achieve spiritual communion. Humphrey herself has pointed out that her style, based on the fall and recovery principle, is integral to the representation of this struggle, and Suzanne Youngermanns detailed. Effort-Shape analysis elucidates how the tension is depicted.[4] One the one hand, there are movements using combinations of strength and bound flow -- with the body narrowed or contracted and the limbs held in, and little attention to the environment -- which depict the constrictions of the flesh; on the other hand, light movements with an emphasis on time qualities and spatial attention are used to represent the Shakers' spiritual yearnings. Similarly, Elizabeth Kagan has pointed out that certain elements of Humphrey's style, a "pattern of rebounding in weight and flow with its corresponding breath fluctuations setting off a spatial reaction," forms the basis of representation in *Water Study*.[5] In sum, then, representation is based on convention and resemblance, but an undrstanding of style is important in recognizing and articulating resemblances.

The dances discussed give us an indication of the range of representation in dance. Individuals, their actions and sequences of events (*Billy the Kid*), sorts (a Shaker dance in *The Shakers*), and types stereotypes (the heroic gas station atttendant in *Filling Station*) are representable. So are fictional individuals (Oedipus in Graham's *Night Journey*) and sorts with no members (the Lilac Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*), for in saying that Bertram Ross looks like or resembles Oedipus we are saying that what we see on stage is what Oedipus would look like if he existed as historicall specified; the resemblance is in a counter-factual context.

Processes are also representable; natural processes, such as the movement of water in *Water Study* or the play of light on crystals in Balanchine's *Jewels*; and psychological processes, such as the process of sexual repression, indulgence, guilt and redemption in Tudor's *Pillar of Fire*.

A dance may also represent by denotational devices. Dance mime exhibits a range of representational devices, from the sign for stop (holding a hand up with the palm out), which resembles an ordinarily used conventional sign for indicating to someone to stop, and which is recognizable to one not acquainted with theatrical conventions, to purely conventional devices based on denotation, not resemblance. In the first act of *Giselle*, for example, when her mother warns Giselle that if she continues to dance she will die and become a Wili, she does so by extending her entwined hands above her head, then clenching her fists, crossing her wrists, lowering her arms in front of her, unclenching her fists, placing her hands at her lower spine and gently fluttering her hands. Here we have conventional mime devices that do not resemble or hint at natural gestures, and the meaning of such movements is not available to one who does not understand the conventions. Since such mime conventions are embedded in the ballet style, an understanding of that style is necessary for grasping their meaning.

Finally, dance representation may occur via representational symbolism in which an action or object represents by resemblance and what is represented is symbolic of a quality set qualities. In Ted Shawn's *Labor Symphony* we see the acts of laborers represented by resemblance -- scattering seeds, cutting, wood, pulling oars, etc. -- but the acts themselves are symbolic of the nobility, dignity, and honesty of manual labor. Mary Wigman effectively employed representational symbolism in *Face of Night* the third dance of her solo *Shifting Landscapes*. The dancer works off a rigid representation of a cross -- feet together and arms extended; the pose resembles a cross, which, in part, symbolizes suffering. Wigman's movement variations the croos-posture themselves resemble agonized suffering and are especially effective in the symbolic context. In many cases the symbolism is not as clear cut. Graham's *Errand in the Maze* features a male dancer who represents the Minotaur by resemblance; he wears a bull-like mask and his arms are fixed on a yoke that rests on his shoulders. Yet the Minotaur is symbolic of crude force, perhaps, or blind oppression, or sexual power; it's hard to unambiguously pin down the meaning. And in certain instances the symbolism seems to be personal or private. At one point in Meredith Monk's *Education of a Girlchild* the dancers assemble

carrying certain objects: a little model house, a stuffed lizard, a set of deer antlers and a scythe. The scythe symbolizes death and time, and one feels that the other objects are presented as symbolic, but taken together their symbolism remains unclear to the viewer.

Let us now consider some important connections between the concepts of expression and representation. It is common to dislinguish the expression of an emotion from an emotion expressed, exhibited, or naturally worn. Jak Palance, for example, could be said to exhibit a cruel facial expression even though he may not be expressing cruelty at a particular time. This distinction is acknowledged in dance. In ballet, for example, both the character dancer and the classical dancer have to be able to do the steps, and certain physical features such as height and limb proportions do, in part, differentiate them, but the character dancer also typically has an expressive or "magnetic" personality; in part this means that he can exhibit a wide range of expressions, not that when he does so he is expressing his emotions. For the character dancer typically exhibits his expressions in mimed action or dramatic representation, and these may not involve the expression of emotion at all.

This brings us to a link between the concepts of expression and representation. If I mimic your fear of a snarling dog, I may cringe and grimace in a way which resembles your expression of the dog, But my behavior is not an expression of fear because I am not afraid. My action is not an expression of fear, but a representation of your expression of fear. So there is a "surface" of expressive behavior that can be used for representational purposes in dance. In dancing the role of Giselle, for example, Fonteyn represents Giselle's love of Albrecht, but Fonteyn is not necessarily feeling the emotion of love. And Nureyev represents Albrecht's love of Giselle, but does not necessarily express his personal love. In fact, Fonteyn notes that Nureyev often worked himself into the role of Albrecht by getting angry; he found it "easier to dance in a rage than in cold blood," and in that context Fonteyn often found herself to be a bit afraid.[6] In that case we have Fonteyn expressing (and, we might imagine, trying to repress) fear of Nureyev, while representing Giselle's expression of love for Albrecht.

Now in most cases in ballet the expression of emotion is not the dancer's focus. Standardly, the dancer concentrates on executing her movements and staying in unison with other dancers. Yet in many cases expression and representation reinforce each other powerfully in dance. Fonteyn, for example, may express delight in the progress of a

performance and also represent Giselle's delight in Albrecht's love. In modern dance, Martha Graham's works are representational, yet training, technique, style and narrative structure are often employed to reinforce expression. In *Appalochian Spring*, Graham represented the slightly nervous, excited, happy Bride, but she *Was* a slightly nervous, excited happy bride, having recently married her dance partner Eric Hawkins. *Errand into the Maze*, as danced by Graham not only represents a woman's indignant fear of crude power and sexual oppression, it expresses Graham's own indignant fear of crude power and sexual oppression.

Expression and representation, then, thread together in three important ways in dance. In many theatrical dances we have the representation of an expression with no emotion being actually expressed by the dancer. But, where representation is effective, it typically rests on the use of a dancer who is expressive in the sense that he can exhibit, and thus represent, a range of expressive postures. Finally, we have dancers, such as *Appalochian Spring*, of whom it can be said that they both express their emotions and represent a portrayed character's expression.

Notes and References

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2. Siegel, *The Shpes of Change*, p. 116:

3. Discussed in Cyril W. Beaumont, *The Ballet Called Giselle* (N. Y.: Dance Horizons, 1969), pp. 78-87.

4. Doris Humphrey and Paul Love, "The Dance of Doris Humphrey," in *The Modern Dance* edited by Virginia Stewart and Merle Armitage (N. Y.: Dance Horizons, 1970), pp. 59-70; Suzanne Youngermann, "The Translation of Culture into Choreography: A Study of Doris Humphrey's *The Shakers*, Based on Labanalysis," in *Essays in Dance Research*; Dance Research Annual *IX*, edited by Dianne L. Woodruff (N. Y.: Congress on Research in Dance, 1978), pp. 93-110.

5. Elizabeth Kagan, "Towards the Analysis of a Score: A Comparative Study of *Three Epitaphs* by Paul Taylor and *Water Study* by Doris Humphrey, in *Essays in Dance Research*: *Dance Research Annual IX*, edited by Dianne L. Woodruff, pp. 75-92.

6. Margot Fonteyn, *Autobiography* (N. Y.: Knopf, 1976) p. 223.

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