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Dance as Experience Field of the Body: A Contribution to Aesthetics

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Abstract. I will focus on dances as performances that bring a knowledge of man and his body to the representation, which would not be visible and comprehensible without it. Dances will be conceived of as patterns in which collectively shared knowledge and collectively shared body practices are staged and performed, and in which a self-expression and self-interpretation of a common order takes place. These are productive, and not reproductive, activities that create communities and cultural identities—namely, by working through difference and alterity.

Keywords. Dance; Experience; Body; Aesthetics.

Dances are one of the most important forms of expression of people and their bodies. In them, cultural identity is expressed, and the self and world relationship of the people represented. They are multifarious. Depending on culture and historical time their forms vary (Wulf, Kamper [2002]). They reflect social and cultural structures. Dances are productive; they create their own field of cultural practice in which many characteristics condense (Junk [1930], Sorell [1983], Baxmann [1991], Brandstetter [1995], McFee [1999]). They bring a knowledge of man and his body to the representation, which would not be visible and comprehensible without them. They show different images, perspectives and interpretations of human physicality. Dances embody a knowledge of man, bring it to the representation and make it experienceable in mimetic processes. At its center are the human body and its movements. These are subject to the dynamics of space and time in which the movements of the body unfold. From the dance movements, which take place in space and time, arise rhythmic dance configurations in which the dynamics of a collective and an individual imaginary are expressed (Wulf [2014]). Bodies in dance are media of human self-expression and self-understanding. They make aesthetic experiences possible.

Dances have synaesthetic effects produced by several senses. Especially important are the movement, hearing, tactile and visual

senses; but also, the senses of smell and taste have meaning for the effects of the dance. Like rituals and games, dances are central to the formation of communities. Synaesthesia and the performativity of dance create an emotional and social similarity between people who dance together. Dances have a synaesthetic and a performative surplus, out of which their social dynamics and meaning develop. Dances are physical, performative, expressive, symbolic, regular, non-instrumental; they are repetitive, homogeneous, ludic and public; they are patterns in which collectively shared knowledge and collectively shared body practices are staged and performed, and in which a self-expression and self-interpretation of a common order takes place. Dances have a beginning and an end and thus a temporal communication and interaction structure. They take place in cultural spaces that shape them. They have a prominent character; they are ostentatious, their meaning is determined by their respective framing.

Dances are varied.

In the wide spectrum of dances, stage dance is just one of the many forms of dance movement. Dances are also created in connection with rituals, festivals, religious ceremonies and pop culture events. Their forms of expression are extremely diverse and cannot be subsumed under a few universal principles. Dances stage body images and movement codes. They create and document body myths; they are expressions of aesthetic representations and inventions. (Brandstetter, Wulf [2007]: 10)

They bring body knowledge to the presentation, which is a silent knowledge whose “blurring” is characteristic for body knowledge (Kraus, Budde, Hietzge, Wulf [2017]). Dances can be analyzed under many aspects. In the context of UNESCO, they are understood as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. They are an important element of the cultural heritage, encompassing practices from many cultures that are not handed down in the form of documents and monuments whose importance to the culture and beyond is undisputed. Among the Intangible Cultural Heritage practices, dances, rituals, oral traditions and

expressions, as well as the practices of dealing with nature and traditional craft knowledge, play a particularly important role. If one tries to determine the peculiarity of these, above all, practical traditions, the following anthropological dimensions are especially suitable for the development of cultural heritage:

- body and performativity;
- mimesis and mimetic learning;
- otherness and alterity;
- anthropological structural features;
- interculturality and anthropological research.

BODY AND PERFORMATIVITY

When the human body is the medium of dance, it results in consequences for the perception and understanding of dances. They result from the temporality of the human body and are determined by the dynamics of space and time. The practices of dance are not fixed but are subject to important transformation processes that are bound to social change and exchange. Since dances are performed with the body, it is important to pay special attention to the physical side of their staging and performance. The question of which historical and cultural body images and body practices are expressed in dances is of importance. For dances to be successfully staged and performed, individual body knowledge and knowledge of how dancers relate to the other dancers is required. The moments of a dance that create a community are closely linked to its physicality and materiality. In its staging and performance, the corporeality and materiality of the individual bodies create a collective (dance) body that is multifaceted and emanate aesthetic effects on the audience. Two aspects are particularly important for the performativity of dance. One is that dances are cultural performances in which societies represent and express themselves and help them to create communities. The second aspect of performativity characterizes the aesthetic side of the body-based performance of dances, without whose experience dances cannot be adequately understood

(Wulf, Göhlich, Zirfas [2001], Fischer-Lichte, Wulf [2001, 2004], Wulf, Zirfas [2007], Wulf [2004a, 2004b]). Because of their performative character, dances create communities and create cultural identity; they also work on difference and alterity. They are important cultural heritage practices that convey traditional values and help to adapt them to people's current needs. When dances no longer express people's attitude towards life, they are changed, or new dances from other cultures are "imported", which then better express people's current attitude to life. This leads to new cultural products in which different cultural traditions mix; hybrid dances are created with new forms of expression and physical representation.

MIMESIS AND MIMETIC LEARNING

The practices of dancing are learned in mimetic processes in which the body knowledge required for dance is acquired. This is done by the perceptive and above all by the practical participation in dances. Through the mimetic reference to dancing role models, the body knowledge required for the performance of dancing is acquired. Such processes of imitation are not aimed at copying the role models; the aim is rather a process of creative imitation that leaves room for the individual design of the dance. The process of approximation differs from one person to another and depends on many individual factors. When a dance is related to a previous one, there is a desire to do something like the other dancers. This desire is based on the desire to become like the others, but at the same time to be different from them. Despite the desire to become similar, there is a desire for differentiation and autonomy (Gebauer, Wulf [1992, 1998, 2003], Wulf [2005, 2013]). At the same time, the dynamics of dances push for repetition and difference, thus generating energies that drive the staging and performance of dances.

Repetition is about taking a "copy" of earlier dances and referring to new situations. The repetition of the dance never leads to the exact reproduction of the earlier dance, but always to the

production of a new staging and performance in which the difference to the former is a constructive element. In this dynamic lies the reason for the productivity of mimetic actions. While maintaining continuity, they also offer scope for discontinuity. Performances of dances make it possible to negotiate the relationship between continuity and discontinuity. The respective conditions of individuals and groups play an important role in the different manipulations of implicit patterns and schemes. For the transmission of a practical knowledge of dance, the sensuality of the mimetic processes, which is bound to the human body, relates to human behavior and is often unconscious. Through mimetic processes, people incorporate images and patterns of dances and make them part of their inner imaginary and imagination. Mimetic processes transfer the world of dance expressions into the inner world of humans. They contribute to culturally enriching and expanding this inner world through images of dance. The resulting mental images and their associated synaesthetic experiences vary from culture to culture, generation to generation, milieu to milieu. Since practical knowledge, mimesis and performativity are mutually interlinked, the repetition plays an important role in the transmission of the knowledge of dance. Dancing competence arises only in cases in which behavior is repeated and changed in the repetition. Without repetition, without the mimetic reference to something present or past, no cultural competence arises. Therefore, repetition is a central aspect of transmitting practical dance knowledge (Resina, Wulf [2019]).

OTHERNESS AND ALTERITY

When dances are physical representations of cultural identity, they also give people experiences of alterity (Todorov [1985], Gruzinski [1988], Waldenfels [1990], Greenblatt [1994], Wulf [2016]). They are an expression of cultural diversity and can be used to communicate cultural heterogeneity, i.e., sensitize for otherness and alterity. Only by developing a sense of alterity a standardization of

culture because of the globalization processes can be avoided. With the help of dances from other cultures, people can be made aware of the importance of the diversity of cultural heritage. Only with the help of this experience they are able to deal with strangeness and difference and develop an interest in the non-identical. Individuals are not self-contained entities. They consist of many contradictory and fragmentary elements. Arthur Rimbaud found the still valid expression «I is another» for this experience. Sigmund Freud's experience that the ego is not master in his own house points in the same direction. The integration of the parts of the subjects excluded from the self-image is a condition for being able to perceive and respect differences and alterity externally. Only when people can perceive their own alterity are they able to perceive the alterity of dances and the otherness of other people and to deal productively with both. If one succeeds in perceiving the other in one's own culture, interest arises in the foreign in other cultures and willingness to appreciate it. For this it is necessary to develop the ability to perceive from the other, i.e., heterologically, and to try to see oneself with the eyes of others (Wulf [2006]).

The development of this ability is opposed by several factors. Among the most important are the factors of rationality and individuality that are particularly valued in European cultures and which correspond with certain patterns of world experience and interpretation. Often, these are so determinative that they do not allow for experience of alterity. In dances, these two forms of reduction of strangeness play a minor role. Because with them it is the corporeality, the movements and rhythms that mediate alterity and that are hardly limited by rationality and individuality. In dances, alterity is conveyed through performativity. In mimetic processes, dancers and spectators reproduce foreign figurations, allowing them to capture and incorporate them. Insofar as movements, rhythms and figurations from foreign cultures are assimilated, new forms, rhythms and movement are created. In the age of globalization, hybrid formations are particularly widespread, in which the origin of individual structural ele-

ments can no longer be clearly identified. Since today more and more people live in different cultures at the same time, hybrid forms of expression are becoming more and more important (Wulf [2016]). The transnational youth culture and the avant-garde of contemporary dance theater contain many examples of this (Wulf et al. [2018], Brougère, Wulf [2018]).

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURAL FEATURES

If dances are considered to be central expressive forms of the human body and thus in an anthropological perspective, then some structural features can be sketched, which designate important dimensions of the dance and the body.

SPACE AND TIME IN THE DANCE

Dances are tied to the spatiality and temporality of the human body and unfold their figurations in space and in time. They aesthetically are connected by movements in which the human body moves alone or with other bodies in temporal sequencing in space. In this process, the context and the framing of space and time play an important role. They incorporate historical and cultural, collective and individual elements that define the representation, expression and atmosphere of the dance. The pictorial scenarios, the virtual spaces and the multi-dimensional temporal orders of the contemporary avant-garde dance create conditions of space and time that expand the potentials of physical expression.

DANCE AND MOVEMENT

In the movements of dance, the body experiences itself, with the music and the movements of the dancers. In its movements, it develops the ability of the design, it forms and becomes an instrument that is used, without going into functional use. The movements of the dance contain a "surplus of meaning" in representation and

expression. In them, figurations are imagined and acted upon. The movements of dance form the body that produces them; they create imaginations and realize them in repeated stagings and performances. They are regular and expression of order. The movements of the dance reveal the docility of the body; it presents itself in exercises and repetitions (Resina, Wulf [2019]). In the movements of the dance an implicit knowledge arises, whose spectrum is very extensive. Depending on the type of dance, its movements are embedded in social power structures or, as with the contemporary avant-garde, largely released from them.

DANCE AND CULTURAL COMMUNITY

Cultural communities without dances are unthinkable. Through the symbolic content of the forms of interaction and above all through the performative processes of interaction and the generation of meaning, dances contribute to the formation of community. The techniques that make dancing possible are based on the repeatability of the necessary procedures and their controllability. Informal communities formed around dances are characterized not only by the space of a collectively shared symbolic knowledge, but also by the corresponding forms of interaction of the dances in which and with which they perform this knowledge. These productions can be understood as an attempt to ensure self-expression and reproduction of the community and its integrity. Dances create communities emotionally, symbolically and performatively; they are staged and expressive, without achieving a comprehensive agreement on the ambiguity of dance and body symbolism.

DANCE AND ORDER

As interactive patterns of action, dances develop a specific order and regularity. Correspondences and similarities can be identified and analyzed between the dances and the structures of their culture of origin. This is illustrated, for example, by a comparison between the dances at the

French court and the dances of bourgeois society at the beginning of the 20th century. Dances can therefore become sources for the analysis of social body images, order and power relations; an analysis of the social order, in turn, can provide clues to understanding the structures of dances (Lippe [1974], Braun, Gugerli [1993]). In the dance a rhythmic dynamization of movements and a ludic handling of the production, change and dissolution of orders takes place.

DANCE AND IDENTIFICATION

Mimetic processes lead to the identification with the dancers and the dances and thus also to the identification with the body movements and body images implicit in the dances, the feelings they trigger and their inherent values and norms. Not occasionally, this also involves processes of inclusion and exclusion. Through identification with certain dances, an identification with lifestyles, milieus and groups is created and embodied in dancing.

DANCE AND MEMORY

Dancing creates memories. These include movements, rhythms, sounds. These are where you will find: atmospheres, erotic experiences, feelings of "flowing", of intoxication and sometimes even of ecstasy, memories of intensities, of rhythms in which people feel themselves and the others. They are synaesthetic memories that include multiple senses. Some are collectively shared memories, others are highly individual. Some memories are primarily related to mental images, others to sounds, yet others to movements. In all, the corporeality of the remembered dances plays a central role.

DANCE AS DIFFERENCE PROCESSING

In many dances differences are worked out that result, among other things, from gender, age

and ethnic differences. By dancing together, different people fade the otherwise existing differences between them. Their dance moves succeed only when they relate to each other and cooperate. They work on the differences that separate them by miming each other in dance and making themselves known to each other. By deferring differences, they create a sense of belonging in rhythmic movements. In dance, in which collective feelings are generated, confirmed and changed, ritualized forms of staging, physical action and play practices as well as mimetic forms of circulation become the focus. Therefore, a performative community of the dancers is understood as an area of action and experience characterized by staged, mimetic and ludic elements (Wulf et al. [2001, 2004c, 2007, 2011]).

DANCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

In many cultures dances are related to the cosmic order, gods, spirits, dead and unborn. With the help of dances an attempt is made to gain influence on the powers of the hereafter. In many cases, these dances are part of sacrificial rituals intended to favor gods and spirits. Mostly this happens with magical dances, in which people with the help of masks and other “props” ascribe supernatural powers, with which they can banish the evil gods and spirits. Not infrequently, through *din* and *ecstasy*, these dances mobilize “superhuman” forces to ward off the threat and endangerment of the world. In these dances, people establish order and power with the help of exclusion and inclusion, through which they seek to secure the cosmic order as well.

DANCE AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Who dances learns much more than just dancing. Dancing develops into a physical competence which goes far beyond the dance and which is also important for other life contexts. It is accompanied by a sensitivity for movements and rhythms, for space and time, for sounds and atmospheres. Dance creates practical, body-based

knowledge that is acquired in mimetic processes. In this, the actors take pictures, rhythms, schemas, movements into their imagination. Their mimetic appropriation leads the practitioners to a practical knowledge that is transferable to other situations. Practical knowledge is practiced, developed and changed in repetition. The knowledge thus incorporated has a historical and cultural character and as such is open to change (Boetsch, Wulf [2005]).

DANCE AND AESTHETICS

Because of their representational and expressive nature as well as their performativity, all dances have an aesthetic dimension that makes it clear that dances are human expressions that make them valuable components of the cultural heritage of humanity that cannot be replaced by anything else. Aesthetic dimensions include dances at the court of Louis XIV and the *avant-garde* of contemporary dance, as well as the magical dances of the conjuring of the gods and the spirits, the folk and ballroom dances of the 20th century and the contemporary dance forms of the youth. The cultural diversity of dances corresponds to different implicit aesthetics, which are characterized by several similarities, but above all by serious differences.

INTERCULTURALITY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

When dances are cultural representations, they also reflect the diversity that defines cultural life in the world despite the unifying tendencies of globalization. If the development of human coexistence requires more than ever to be able to cope with cultural diversity, the practices of the “immaterial” cultural heritage, not held in monuments, and in particular the dances, offer opportunities open to the stranger and gain experience in dealing with cultural diversity. In the field of education, too, there is a challenge and opportunity here; today more than ever, education has to be understood as an intercultural task (Featherstone [1995], Wulf [1995, 2006, 2016]).

OUTLOOK

Dances are forms of expression and expression of people and their bodies that make something tangible that would not be experienced without them. In many dances, people experiment with themselves and their bodies, with their history and their culture, trying to express something that cannot be presented and performed differently. Therefore, many dances, especially in the field of dance art, have an experimental claim that encourages dancers to invent and explore through the means of staging and performing the body, which contributes to the knowledge of man. If one approaches this knowledge today from the side of anthropology, three paradigms of anthropological research, with which an anthropologically oriented dance and body research can be constituted, are particularly suitable. This is philosophical anthropology, as it was developed in Germany, which emphasizes the inherently open character of human history and the possibilities of human perfectibility; the historical anthropology of the School of Annales developed in France in the first half of the 20th century and its further developments, which focus on the historical character of the human body and culture as well as questions of mentality research; as well as Anglo-Saxon cultural anthropology or ethnology with its interest in cultural diversity and heterogeneity (Wulf [2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2010, 2013]). On the basis of these paradigms is the development of a historical-anthropological dance and body research, which is not limited to certain cultures and epochs and which is in the reflection of its own historicity and cultural ability, to overcome the Eurocentrism of large parts of the body research and the aesthetics. This requires a transdisciplinary and transcultural orientation as well as a reflexive self-criticism.

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