

The Social Relevance of Noble Dance: Gaining Power

The Historical, Anthropological and Psychological Arguments

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Introduction

Dance and body language are among the oldest forms of communication of the human species and can also be found in the animal kingdom. Noble dance had an explicit formative role for civil development in the Early Modern Period, because such dance helped to embed aristocratic norms and human values in society. Being a good dancer was more than a status symbol. Perhaps for this reason, noble dance (in contrast to music, acting and painting) is the only form of art that is practised at official events. Even today, many events are accompanied by dance, for example, the Nobel Prize ceremony and diplomatic summits. The Viennese Opera Ball and the Dresden *SemperOpernball*, for which top politicians take dance lessons, are famous.

The fact that balls remain among the basic components of high society events leads to the question of the significance of noble dance.

This paper presents the hypothesis that the social relevance of noble dance is based on its role in evoking a sense of power (see below).¹ This hypothesis will be supported by arguments from historical, anthropological and psychological studies in this paper.

Hypothesis: The relevance of noble dancing results from the power-related effect of dancing as such. In other words, choreographed dancing gives the feeling of being a powerful person. This property comes from some special effects of dance such as emotion regulation, sovereignty, bonding and grace.

This hypothesis will be explored using historical, anthropological and psychological arguments, including the domains of dance, as well as the psychological explanation for dance's impact as a medium to gain power.

Figure 1: Israhel van Meckenem the Younger, *Dance at the Court of Herod*, engraving, second half of the 15th century. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Inv.-Nr. A 591.



The engraving *Dance at the Court of Herod* is evidence that the basics of noble dance were already established at the beginning of the court-dance tradition in the fifteenth century (see

Fig. 1). The couples (they were probably dancing a Pavane) show grace, keep a distance from each other as a kind of emotional regulation, and enter into a bond.

Historical Arguments

It is known that political and royal ceremonies from the Middle Ages onwards included social and mimetic dance. Ballets were often the diplomatic decor during summits or weddings. Dance was the medium of the royals for depicting political interests, especially between 1550 and approximately 1720. Choreographies were understood as mirror images of cosmic order and harmony in the state – with the king in the centre. And it was the aesthetic effect of grace that made the ruler seem supernatural, a god-like being. It is very conceivable that the consciousness of being able to move more gracefully than lower class people created a sense of personal power. Grace demarcated the nobility and their virtues and, in order to have the ability to be graceful at any moment, aristocrats and some of lower rank learned the noble dance (beside fencing, riding or ball games). In other words, looking gracious was a way to demonstrate a position of power. For only those who appeared graceful did not belong to the lower classes and consequently exercised power over them.

Access to the Aristocratic World

On the other hand, noble dance provided a medium for the bourgeoisie to participate in the courtier's life, because it helped them to gain abilities for aristocratic tasks.

Commoners wanted positions at courts, and it was clear that they needed dancing skills for that. Otherwise, they would not be able to participate in diplomatic gatherings, including negotiations. The importance of dance in this respect is shown by the beginning of the conversation between Capriol and Arbeau in *Orchésographie*, in which Capriol said that he was unable to participate in the ceremonies of the upper class due to his lack of dancing skills.²

When the bourgeoisie began to recognize the importance of aristocratic dance for a career, dancing schools were established in cities. An important impetus came from the trade fairs that took place in spring and autumn; these were accompanied by numerous cultural highlights such as opera performances, comedies or balls. The urban balls were meeting places used for negotiations, business talks and looking for a partner. So, these balls had important functions, as did the court festivals for rulers.

Similarly, as well as the official dance events, private dance performances served as a framework for meetings. In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, rich citizens built ballrooms in their houses. Dances in homes were sometimes performed in a circle around a table.

Given the fact that noble dance was an important means of conversation and diplomacy, it is no surprise that dance was taught at universities. Since 1500, the development of the education system of the European universities was connected with dance culture. Furthermore, dance education and practice developed at the Inns of Court.³ Having access to excellent dance and etiquette teaching became more and more important for the commoners, and it became a criterion for choosing an appropriate university. In addition, special schools were built where candidates for a position as minister were trained in fencing, riding and dancing.

It is obvious that dance has made a significant contribution to the development of the bourgeoisie and its power within the aristocratic world.

Arguments from Anthropology: Evolution

According to a study by Albert Mehrabian (1967), the effect of a spoken message is determined by its meaning, the sound of the voice and the body language in a ratio of 7:38:55.⁴ In light of

this fact, it is clear that the heritage of more than 5,000 years of dance culture determines identity, self-esteem and human consciousness.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, we want to disassociate ourselves from or be like a particular group of people or even animals through posture and body language.

In his book *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*,⁵ Yosef Garfinkel describes the animal roots of dance. Cave paintings show that dance was also part of the culture of pre-state communities – an important medium for religious ceremonies. The transient human feels close to god during religious singing and dancing and this gives them a sense of security. If they transfer this ritual to the group, this feeling is amplified, an increase which ultimately leads to a group dynamic between the dancer and the singer.

In alphabetic groups, body movement and dance were the basic mechanisms for conveying knowledge to other members of the community and between the generations. In ancient times, thinking, moving and living were declared as causally dependent.⁶ Dance is therefore embedded in the genetic material of every human in order to interpret nonverbal signs and deduce what another person thinks, feels and intends to do. Gabriele Brandstetter and Christoph Wulf see dancing as a form of human knowledge because dancing reveals information about their culture, education and character.⁷ Barbara Segal argues that dance throughout the ages has been used as a class identifier for the upper classes.⁸ Volker Saftien postulates, in his book *Ars Saltandi*, that the upright posture which characterized all courtly dances, marks the high status of nobility and their position in society. In contrast to the noble dance, movements such as bowed knees, upper bodies bent backwards or forwards, pounding, clapping and wild twists reflect the daily work of lower-class people as is depicted in Pieter Brueghel's (the Elder) painting *Wedding Dance*.⁹

The style of body movement and dance reflect and reveal the cultural background of people and their status. Against this context, it is believable that the power effect of noble dance came from the feeling of having a higher position in society than the folk dancers.

Bonding

Bonding is a crucial element of dancing that is currently being investigated in labs.¹⁰ The dancers bond with the music, other dancers and the room.

Bonding is essential for evolution, because it offers protection. It is clear that people who have a similar sociality, morality and values, as well as passions, show similar movement when they listen to the same music. People who think alike show similar movement. They connect with the music as well as with each other. The language of movement is their means of communication, where they identify like-minded people without having to talk to them. This nonverbal communication was essential to survival in prehistoric times and is an important part of evolution. So bonding is closely connected to communication – during dancing, dancers use nonverbal language.

From this point of view, it is conceivable that moving the body was the first form of human communication. There is no evidence, but it is obvious that body movements connected to sound were the earliest components of language. Nonverbal and verbal language probably developed in parallel and they have an equal importance for evolution.

But communication by bonding is more than that. We bond with a culture, so bonding is also an identification with a milieu. In the case of the baroque court dance, there is the phenomenon that a suite of sarabande, rigaudon, forlane, allemande and gigue, for example, was more a

classification of nobility than a national separation of dance types. As B. Segal said, (Segal, 2014, 31), this classification functioned as class identifier.

Arguments from Cognitive Psychology: Top-down

Dance was an instrument to control emotions (see below). This emotional control is the basis of virtue theory and in the Early Modern Period, the main behavior characteristic of the aristocrats. Accordingly, emotion regulation was regarded as an important aim and educational object of the dancing practice. The following section explains which cognitive process plays the main role in emotion regulation.

The main mechanism of emotion regulation is the top-down process.¹¹ Incoming environmental stimuli attach to available knowledge or contextual information so that the emotion triggered by the stimulus cannot become independent in the body. The stimulus is processed through the intervention of prior knowledge or contextual information. This indirect stimulus processing is referred in cognitive psychology as a top-down process.

A top-down process expires when known stimuli are detected in the right context. In the case of noble dancing, it is the choreography that regulates the musical appeal. Transferred that means: the acoustic stimulus triggers memories of the choreography – a response of the body to the stimulus. Because the choreography determines the body's reaction to stimulus, choreographed dance regulates emotional movement -- in contrast to free dance which is inspired by the stimulus-related emotion. The top-down emotion is passed through a cognitive processing system, the choreography, at the end of which its effect and thus the reaction of the body has been changed. An external stimulus meets a prepared or programmed reaction. The autonomy of the emotion in the body is prevented, excluding unpredictable body reactions.

Why was emotion regulation so important for the nobility? The top-down process is an endogenous control system that serves to steer one's own actions and to exclude foreign determination. That is why top-down processes give us a sense of power. The emotion regulation leaves the feeling of victory over seduction by the outside and the manipulation of foreign stimuli.

Control over one's own actions supports self-confidence. One decides according to one's own intentions and yardsticks and is therefore self-controlled and not externally manipulated. Power over oneself gives trust in one's own ability to act. We understand ourselves as a leader. So, emotion regulation is a mechanism to control the impact of external stimuli, to protect against external influences; and furthermore it is an instrument for steering the intentions of others.

In summary: top-down processing during choreographed dance is the realization of a moving program in the brain, the course of perception of the stimulus and the recording of the emotion taking place in the context of previously stored content, so that the emotion falls into a pattern.

Furthermore, emotion regulation was the basis of the art of disguise through body language. This makes it possible to mask negative emotions. Consequently, emotion regulation was also beneficial for masking.

Bottom-up

The opposite of top-down processing is the bottom-up principle of processing of stimulus analysis and related reactions. During this process, the stimulus is perceived by an organ,

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analyzed in the brain according to various criteria such as volume, rhythm, harmony, repetitions, classified as pleasant or unpleasant, and finally responded to by the body's reaction.

Bottom-up works during free dance performances¹²: The movement of the body to music is a response to the stimulus and shows how the dancer finds the music.

In summary: in bottom-up processing the stimulus is processed directly and without the intervention of prior knowledge. Transferred to the dance, the body's reaction to the musical stimulus is not triggered by choreographic items. The stimulus-related emotion moves through the body and triggers the movement. The stimulus will be analyzed, followed by the body's reaction.

Conclusion

The social relevance of noble dance results from its power-conferring effect, which comes from bonding, body language, grace and emotion regulation, as well as the art of disguise. The fact that ballroom dancing gives people a feeling of power is shown in very different ways. Firstly, it is a medium by which people present themselves as decent and wonderful persons and characters.

However, the importance of dancing for a sense of power goes even deeper. As shown, dancing is evolutionarily anchored in us, body movement was used as a means of communication in prehistoric times. That is why we trust body signals and physical speech more than verbal utterances. In this respect, every conscious form of body movement - including noble dance - is a form of exercising power

In the case of noble dance, the top-down process evokes emotion regulation which makes the messages not only believable but also suggestive. We premeditatedly convey our specific personal interests and concerns. More importantly, one learns to regulate emotions and use them purposefully. This ability to control external influences is required to manipulate others' thinking. Therefore, choreographed dance - the excellent instrument for learning this - was so important for the aristocrats.

Maybe this is the reason why choreographed dance (besides fencing and ball games) was the main 'sport' of High Society – until today.

End Notes

¹ I am grateful to Barbara Segal for the literature tips for this topic. Furthermore, I warmly thank Jane Gingell for correcting the text.

² Thoinot Arbeau. *Orchésography*, fol. 2v. Reprint Hildesheim, New York 1980.

³ Walter Salmen. *Der Tanzmeister. Geschichte und Profile eines Berufes vom 14. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*. Mit einem Anhang "Der Tanzmeister in der Literatur". Hildesheim, Zürich, New York 1997 (= *Terpsichore. Tanzhistorische Studien* 1), pp. 55-87.

⁴ Albert Mehrabian/Susan Ferris. *Inference of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels*. In: *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 31 (1967), Nr. 3, pp. 248-252.

⁵ Yosef Garfinkel. *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*. University of Texas Press, 2003.

⁶ Bernhard Waldenfels. "Sichbewegen". In: *Tanz als Anthropologie*. Ed. by Gabriele Brandstetter and Christoph Wulf. München 2007, p. 14.

⁷ Gabriele Brandstetter/Christoph Wulf (Ed.). *Tanz als Anthropologie*, Einleitung. München 2007, p. 9.

⁸ Barbara Segal: "Every Savage Can Dance" or, Dance as a Class Identifier. In *Ballroom, Stage & Village Green: Contexts for Early Dance*. Proceedings of a Conference held at Prior Park College, Ralph Allen Drive, Bath on 11-13 April 2014. Ed. by Barbara Segal and William Tuck. London 2015, p. 31.

⁹ Volker Saftien. *Ars Saltandi*. Hildesheim, Zürich, New York 1994, p. 201.

¹⁰ Danish National Research Foundation's Center for Music in the Brain (MIB), Aarhus University; Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences (MPI), Leipzig.

¹¹ Moving during an acoustic stimulus requires the so-called primary attention. Unlike riding and fencing, dancing has always been tied to music that evokes emotions in the dancer. The purpose of the choreographical dance for nobility was to regulate those emotions and harness them for specific purposes.

¹² Bottom-up = Immediate body response to the stimulus; top-down = Indirect response to the stimulus. In bottom-up processes, the dancer reacts to the emotion triggered by the stimulus with their own, mostly spontaneous, body movement. Versus that, in top-down processes, the dancer responds to the stimulus with a body movement determined by the choreography. In this case, the dancer pushes the emotion down and regulates their emotional reaction to the music stimulus. This is a form of music cognition.