

Dance as art and as expression of harmony and psychosomatic totality: some psychological considerations

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The dance acquires such different and various meanings so that it can be considered as a complex polysemic form of no verbal message whose effectiveness can be compared with that of music and figurative arts because it can address to the unconsciousness without any linguistic distinction among different populations. But it is clear that, just like the other forms of artistic message, the dance itself is affected by the social cultural and environmental conditions in which it develops itself and from which it becomes one of its expressions. In this context a psychological consideration can be inserted: the body language autonomy leaves out of consideration the verbal expression and refers to the psychosomatic aspect which is the base of a lot of Oriental philosophies. In this “speech” there is a common characteristic and in the meanwhile there is a situation of “antithesis” between the West and the East. The West discovers the body to put it in the service of the Ego by increasing the expressive possibilities; the East supports that the body can condition the Ego by determining the way of being and acting. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate as the dance is a particular kind of “language” and so it supposes questions referring in particular to the involvement, the participation and even the Ego’s partial exclusion in the different kinds of a complex manifestation which, under a common “denominator”, includes distant rituals, often withdrawn by antithetic psychic dynamics.

Keywords: dance, no verbal message, art, psychology, psychosomatic psychology

La danza come arte ed espressione di armonia e totalità psicosomatica: alcune considerazioni psicologiche

La danza assume significati così vari e distanti da potersi considerare come una forma complessa e polisemica di messaggio non verbale la cui efficacia è paragonabile a quella della musica e dell’arte figurativa, in quanto può parlare direttamente all’inconscio senza distinzioni linguistiche tra i vari popoli. È chiaro che, come tutte le altre forme di messaggio artistico, la stessa danza risente delle condizioni socioculturali e ambientali entro cui si sviluppa e di cui diviene una delle espressioni. Nel contesto di questo discorso si inserisce una considerazione psicologica importante: l’autonomia del linguaggio del corpo che prescinde dall’espressione verbale e rimanda al discorso di carattere psicosomatico che è alla base di molte filosofie orientali. In questo discorso vi è una caratteristica comune e nello stesso tempo una situazione di antitesi tra Oriente ed Occidente. L’Occidente riscopre il corpo per porlo al servizio dell’Io aumentandone le possibilità espressive; l’Oriente ritiene che il corpo può condizionare e condiziona l’Io determinandone spesso il modo di essere e di agire. Obiettivo del nostro lavoro è di dimostrare come la danza rappresenti un particolare tipo di “linguaggio” e, come tale, pone quesiti che riguardano in particolare il coinvolgimento, la partecipazione e, ai limiti, la parziale esclusione dell’Io nei vari tipi di una complessa manifestazione che, sotto un comune denominatore, comprende rituali distanti, spesso sottesi da dinamiche psichiche antitetiche.

Parole chiave: danza, messaggio non verbale, arte, psicologia psicosomatica

According to Van Der Leeuw the dance is not an aesthetic matter but it is a cult in which life comes back with its powerful primordial rhythm.

By dancing, men put themselves on a level of psychological reality which is different from the normal one: they become animals, hunters, divinities and heroes, moon, wind, sun, they plunge themselves into a scheme of mythic representations which are brought up-to-date again to the individual’s and group’s advantage. The way out from an ordinary Self is not a pretence, not a play but a reality: the participants don’t realize any detachment between the character represented and the one who represents him...

To Plato the dance had divine origins: the gestures sprang out from The deepness of a soul, the enthusiasm was the sign of the interior presence of God. In a primitive Christian text it is written: to the Universe the one who dances belongs the one who doesn’t dance cannot know what happens (Paolo Anselmi).

A conference at the University of Cassino in 1983, in the occasion of the cultural initiatives promoted by the Rector Cristaldi, by the French artist Martine Brochard, a dancer and an actress at the “Comédie Française”, gave the hint to this paper which aims at being just a short essay about psychology and dance(1).

In referring about the essential moments of her professional training as a dancer, Brochard highlighted the importance of the body's "recapture" in the wholeness of the no-verbal expressive language.

The items which appear particularly meaningful are: "the acquisition of the whole body scheme in the consciousness field"; "the brain appropriation of parts of the body such as the foot" and "the gradual spreading of the consciousness – at a cerebral level – of the existence of the whole complex somatic apparatus whose existence is almost usually ignored by the Ego".

"There is a moment" –she said – "when, straight on the feet with arms up over the head, for the first time one feels the existence of the whole body as a unity; this is a sensation which arrives in a gratifying psychic dimension of eucenestesis and detachment from reality".

"At this point the word is at the body's service and not the contrary". Always according to Brochard, this result is the fruit of a set of technical and gymnastic devices which aim at a possible "managing" of the emotional and "gestural" language through a perfect control of one's own somatic expressive means.

What comes out is that particular kind of no verbal message – which is just the dance – whose aim in the West is the expression of "figurative" contents inspired and withdrawn by a musical comment ranging from the classical music to jazz, to electronic music.

In this context a psychological consideration can be inserted: the body language autonomy which leaves out of consideration the verbal expression and refers to the psychosomatic aspect which is the base of a lot of Oriental philosophies.

Therefore in this "speech" there is a common characteristic and in the meanwhile there is a situation of "antithesis" between the West and the East. The West discovers the body to put it in the service of the Ego by increasing the expressive possibilities; the East supports that the body can condition the Ego by determining the way of being and acting.

As matter of fact, except for all the implications of the yoga various techniques, being master of one's own body can mean recognizing a substantial union between body and psyche, springing a mutual conditioning which "acts" as self-revelation of one's own global possibilities.

The interpretation and the use made in the West, with a mainly artistic aim, and in the East, with a mainly self-controlling and self-knowledge aim, in case reinforces the common assumption of theories based on the absence of any barrier between psychic activities and somatic ones(2).

In this sense the dance specific language, as expression of determined "conscious" and "unconscious" psychic contents, becomes one of the interpretative keys by which the human being aims at the searching and the self-knowledge.

Therefore the dance is a particular kind of "language" and so it supposes questions referring in particular to the involvement, the participation and even the Ego's partial exclusion in the different kinds of a complex manifestation which, under a common "denominator", includes distant rituals, often withdrawn by antithetic psychic dynamics.

The Ego's exclusion in disordered psychomotor movements, which are induced in any case, is not an unquestionable fact and the phenomenon itself doesn't acquire any particular worth of the no-verbal message.

But there are a lot of religious rituals in which the dance becomes "semanteme" of a fideistic fact and whose expression is concretized in a gestural language aiming at giving contents of its own "faith" and "belief" in a figurative way.

Particularly worth of noting is the Buddhist and Shinto dance in which rhythmic and harmonic movements recall not only religious “meanings” in a wide sense but even specific connotations of a certain faith like, for example, the Buddhist dancers’ hands movement which directly “mimes” Buddha’s gestural message.

On the same line there are the Shinto dances which, accompanied by an extremely simple music with its high tones and basic flatness, symbolically and gesturally want “to mean” the contents of the Shinto doctrine.

The problem we are interested in is the Ego’s “participation” and “involvement” in the action, the mechanisms of “empathy” and the automatism of actions the dancer makes in a condition of partial awareness.

Like in all the psychic facts of mystic- religious kinds, we think that the Ego can be partially excluded and the ritual represents the figurative translation of acquired elements, dogmatically, in terms which are very near to the primary thought.

Specifically we refer to the Buddhist and Shinto dances because the sense of “control” which is typical of the two doctrines, is directly mirrored in quite slow and rhythmic movements and “translates” the inspiration to the serenity belonging to the two traditional thoughts.

In the explanation of the religious “contents”, worth of noting is even the dance represented on the Egyptian monuments.

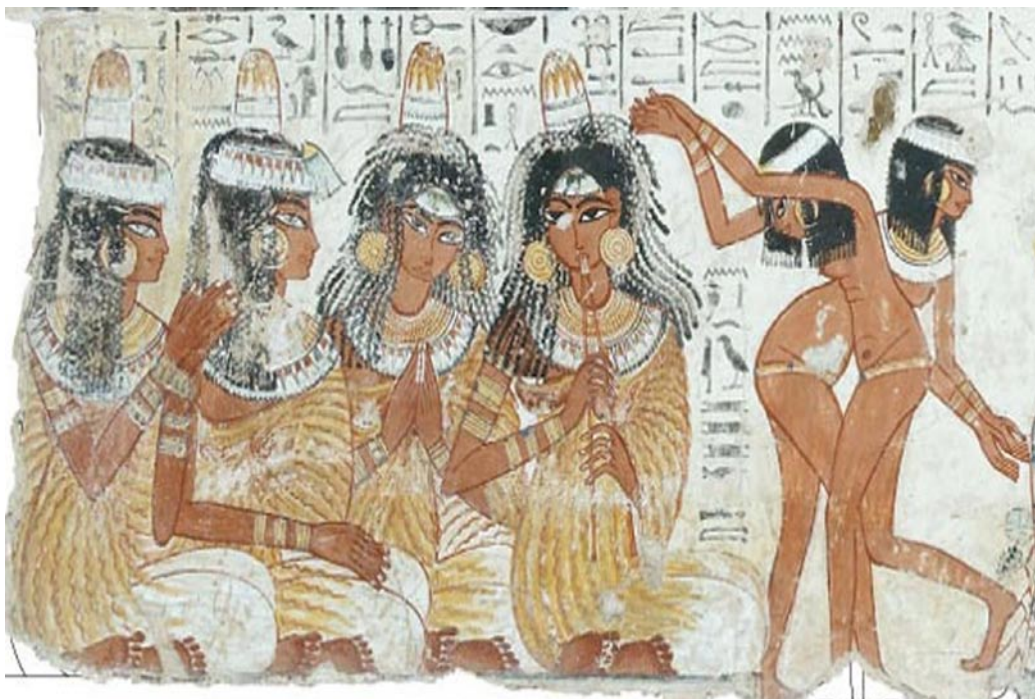


Figure 1

Egyptian art. Music and dance for the guest of honor. Some musicians are depicted in frontal view, a rare example for the ancient Egyptian art. (Painting from the tomb chapel of the official Nebamun, the eighteenth dynasty, about 1350 BC - Luxor (London, British Museum).

The “Dictionnaire de la civilisation égyptienne” dedicates to the dance the following paragraph: «all the choreography of a complex rhythm lives again on the Egyptian monuments, starting from the ritual Pygmies’ dance which accompanies the dawn and the most unbridled warriors – dancers, who seem to sprout directly from the African Savannah, till the simple exhibition of dancers who brighten up the banquets with their pleasant figures». As a religious ritual before

becoming a profane enjoyment, the sacred dance goes wild in different circumstances: from the feasts (see the feast of Opet - the boats' procession) to the funerals or even in the middle of ceremonies devoted to the goddess Hathor.

Some divinities take part to these dances and, according to Lucian of Samothrace, the dances "*translated*" *the expressive movements in dogmas which are more mysterious than religion*: Apis' and Osiris' myths, the transformation of Gods into animals and above all love-affairs among Gods.

An example of these mythological episodes, which are translated into dance, is "represented" in a picture of the Middle Empire; in an acrobatic gesticulation five girls transpose the "song of the four winds" whose text is not known to us except for a collection of religious formulas. «We were given these winds – the girls say – and the wind of life is the Northern wind. I was given it and I live on it».

As far as profane dances, they appear on walls, on bas-reliefs as parts of banquets and private feasts; the texts are about professional dancers whose performances were required on great occasions.

Starting from fixed gestures, performed in a certain moment of the dance, it is difficult to imagine what a complete ballet could be.

For a long time a Swiss Egyptologist, Henry Wild, has studied all these choreographic scenes and in them he has recognized the following behaviours and figurations:

1. The still upright position with the arms' movement and the body's waving (far prefiguration of the dances of almeés);
2. The simple march or a march on the tiptoes, with arms up as "corbeille" or as the Roman wave, the running, the jump in a upright position or in the inclined one, the *bond*, the *fente* forward and even on a side, the arabesque, the great *battement*, the pirouette, the bridge, the acrobatic *culbute*.

All these figurations could be combined according to a variable programme and they were performed at the rhythm of hands clapping, accompanied by drums and sometimes by instrumental music.

From the text reported we can deduce an important psychological consideration coming from Lucian's opinion: the most mysterious religious dogmas, and in particular the primitive religions, actually answer to no rational thought process, which partially springs out from the unconsciousness. Therefore we can consider as easier, and even obliged, the translation into figurations and symbols of these contents which may lose their meanings if interpreted and translated into a rational language. Their stillness on the stone increases the semantic potentiality as it "fixes" certain symbolic-figurative moments which could be lost in the wholeness of the dance. The Egyptian sacral dance can be put into the wide field of the no verbal message, such as music and figurative art, sharing the possibility of transmitting mystery "contents" which act through "empathic" mechanism and "reinforce" the irrational- fideistic substrate of a religion like the Egyptian one which needed such aspects even because of socio-cultural and political reasons.

Worth of noting is also the translation into gestures and figurations of the "songs of the four winds" which is itself characterized by a symbolic gesticulation; it is rich of emotional contents and, for its rhythmic and harmonic performance, it is one of the "meaningful" dances which don't degenerate into unbridled movements as pure psychomotor rushes.

Uncontrolled psychomotor rushes are instead possible in rituals coming from a fetishistic belief in which the dance itself symbolically translates the condition of paroxysmic excitement realizing the union with the almighty “devil” that inspires them (the unconsciousness).

This gesticulation, as a simple uncontrolled liberation of driving energies, has a very different meaning from the dancing ritual expressing sublimated energies in complex fideistic mental dynamics.

For example, this meaning belongs to the Polynesian dances whose gestures aim at “miming” the different moments of a life at the seaside and whose global symbolism expresses the migration, the sufferings, and the gestures of people directly linked to the sea whose rhythm of movements in succession is even absorbed.

Even in this case the subject’s Ego is not completely aware of the meaning of his gesture and therefore the dance becomes a “symbolical figurative translation” of a primary language which is dogmatically transmitted through generations.

This kind of symbolism, like an “unconscious anamnesis”, can be charged with visible meanings when stories of wars and conquests are told.

This is true for the Mongolian dances or at least for a part of them when the dancer, in this case a man, expresses episodes of violence and conquering through his gestures.

The dance for the Andean populations is mainly part of the same type, in the sense that the dancers, accompanied by a music produced by “local made” instruments imitating the wind blowing and the lure high tones or mountain sounds, translate into a symbolic language the kind of life and fight the man has on high mountains in conditions of hardship and risk.

As a common data what survives is the Ego’s limited presence or exclusion and so the classification of the dance in the wide range of no verbal messages which are far from the meaning and content of the articulated message.

It is obvious that, just for its symbolic-figurative contents and for that mystic- mythic aspect which is common to different kind of the examined ones, the dance can become an important element in the personality building; in this consideration the intuition of Pythagoras’ school about the dance as a realization of the two concepts of “rhythm and harmony” is still totally valid.

But, as said before, there are forms of unbridled psychomotor movements, which are equally classified as dances, in which the mind, dominated by an aggressive drive, gradually reaches a condition of frenzy, which is mutual to the somatic excitement.

In them the Ego’s exclusion is the motivating factor of the irrational raving.

In the Bodù’s ritual (the classic belief spreading among the Haitian people), the dance – which is performed in a greatly suggestive context, by night at the torches light among holy trees – starts in a relative slow mood to reach gradually the obsessive tones of rolling drums leading the subject to a real “trance” state with a severe alteration of the facial expressions which don’t preserve the human expression any longer.

This pure driving psychic “status” is considered as a “possession” by “Loà” (a local divinity) and the facial expression, which is interpreted by a priestess according her own “mental categories”, becomes a religious message transmitted by the divinity.

In this particular sacral dance worth of noting is the Ego’s total exclusion and the lack of memories at the end of the crisis which could be defined as para- epileptic. The primitivism of the “belief” with the lack of metaphysical values and the presence of an intense complex

“animism” justifies even the unconsciousness’ predominance in the ritual and the Ego’s gradually total exclusion.

Other dances among primitive populations - and even the North American Indian dances before the attack - have a similar meaning.

In these dances too the Ego’s inhibition and the “liberation” of driving energies concretize a synergism among rapidly successive uncoordinated movements and a progressive total fall of the rational control powers.

It is clear that an inebriated condition by alcohol or drugs or orgiastic dimension of primitive religious rituals can have as result the translation of aggressive psychic energies into physical violence⁽³⁾.

A complete different meaning, although in the no verbal communication, belongs to some dances which are merely symbolic with animistic and fabulous figurations having their expression in classical ballets like “The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, Giselle, etc.”, whose important psychological fact is always the figurative expression of fantastic elaboration of the “primary thought” whose meaningful aspects are underlined and reinforced by music.



Figure 2
Filippo Lippi, *Histories of Saint Stephen and John the Baptist: Salomé's Dance*
(XV century Cathedral of Saint Stephen, Prato, Italy).

The last but not the least consideration is about the women’s dance under the aspect of a sexual excitement caused by dances like Salomé’s one or the Hindu dancing girls’ dances at the Muslim courts or the belly dance. In the specific case what prevails in mind is the erotic drive modelling the ritual where the dancer’s Ego has its role in the meaning of the gesture choice and the wise use of a symbolic language to graduate the erotic driving explosion till the Ego’s exclusion.

Therefore the dance, under a unique denomination, concretely acquires such different and various meanings so that it can be considered as a complex polysemic form of no verbal message whose effectiveness can be compared with that of music and figurative arts because it can address to the unconsciousness without any linguistic distinction among different populations.



Figure 3
Petr Il'ic Čajkovskij, *Swan Lake*.

But it is clear that, just like the other forms of artistic message, the dance itself is affected by the social cultural and environmental conditions in which it develops itself and from which it becomes one of its expressions. In this way one can explain and understand the huge difference between dances with a high spiritual content such as the Shinto and Buddhist dances, and a ritual of simple violence such as primitive populations' dances like the Zulu's, Maoris' ones etc, and a propitiatory ritual such as the dance for raining and at last the splendid coral artistic creations such as "Swan Lake" in which the dance itself becomes a pure Eros' sublimation.

Our short essay ends with a psychoanalytic conclusion which more precisely underlines the above said element, that is to say the prevailing of the primary thought and the symbolic language on the Ego's functions.

In the Mongolian burial ritual the most important moment is represented by a riding in circle on the sand under which the dead is buried in order to plain the soil and hide any traces of the grave: it is a clear unconscious figuration of the death meant as a way back to the Mother - Land in the most classic Freud's meaning.

That shows how in the human mind the reason - which a part of it - fails in front of the primitive emotional energies which are able to express messages addressed to the man in his wholeness as a being who can think and feel in an universal way.

For all the reasons said above, the dance was considered by Jung himself in 1916 as part of a psychotherapeutic process and today as matter of fact it is among the means used in determined pathological conditions in which the Ego's direct communication with his own body can eliminate the psycho-physical barriers constituted by muscular tension or contractures which are directly linked to the emotional block. Therefore the body's expressive movement becomes the Unconsciousness' voice; the therapist has the task to suggest the patient a set of movements which can modify the mental dynamics and help the exploration of thoughts, emotions, dreams, fancies, etc: Today this result is searched even through the book-therapy which, like the dance-therapy, supports more and more the traditional therapeutic models.

Notes

1. Of course we are just considering the dance as an expressive means, excluding any “superficial” “not-meaningful” form of ballet.
2. What follows is a newly affirmed psychosomatic unity and the failure of all the theories based on the “cogito ergo sum” philosophy and on Plato’s philosophy with the Myth of the Chariot (which is similar to the Oriental myth of the carriage).
3. On the background there is the concept of mass-psychosis with its historical social implications

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