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## **Anthropology in Dance Gesture Systems of the Body**

### **Abstract**

My paper outlines an anthropological approach to dance focusing on the body's interpretation within the contexts of space, sensuality, theater, fashion, aesthetic quality, and the development of gesture systems of the body. The study addresses the question whether the bareness of the body and space may be defined as a form of emptiness or rather as a case of sincere manifestation and revolves around the issues of social and personal attitudes related to dance performance, including mimetic performers, limits of social body norms, and the possibilities of survival, especially the changes in the female body's perceptual and social roles and strategies.

**Keywords:** body, consciousness, art, theater, politics

My paper focuses on and outlines an anthropological interpretation of body motion.<sup>1</sup> I argue that an overview of the body's gesture system may provide a means to the better understanding of the differences in movement interpretations and at the same time also clarify its role and responsibilities.

My research focuses primarily on the art of movement and my findings indicate that there are numerous forms of interpretation of the body itself. The anthropological approach relies on several criteria and cultural anthropology also uses numerous somatic-aesthetic methods to gain a better understanding of the body as a material subject. American researchers argue that the body is an element of the cultural medium performing a social function, while European scholars, in contrast, contend that in the cooperation of the body-soul-spirit it may be a means of expressing individuality in culture.<sup>2</sup> Christoph Wulf, in his perspective on historical anthropology in the European cultural context (and with relevance to the body) also applies it to gaining knowledge of the person existing within the body. Wulf considers the

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<sup>1</sup> My research was conducted in the Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology program of the Doctoral School of History and Ethnography at the University of Debrecen.

<sup>2</sup> Kaepler 2000; Royce 2004; Wulf 2013.



dialectical study of diachronic and synchronous elements of motion to be primary in the anthropological interpretation of the body, highlighting the unique characteristics of historicity and culture and creating the possibility for a disciplinary and international dialogue within anthropology. Secondly, within this specific form of historical-cultural anthropology, the mimetic gesture system of the body may also serve as a subject of research within the social context of society, which it associates with logic and emotions.<sup>3</sup> Agreeing with Máté Kavecsánszki, the theory of Christoph Wulf covers the interpretation of body movement in the most complex way.<sup>4</sup> In my previous studies, I adapted Anya Peterson Royce's theory, arguing that the aesthetics of dance itself and its performance may be best interpreted from a cross-cultural perspective.<sup>5</sup> According to Royce, the body and creative intelligence, through the cultural impact created in society, provide an opportunity for the emergence of new stylistic forms in the world of dance as a representative of performing arts.<sup>6</sup> Maybe it is the combination of these two types of research approaches, the etic and emic perspective, which may together provide a dance anthropological thesis for the interpretation of the body and the understanding of movement. The opportunities for interpreting culture and the body, the phenomenon of dance itself and the interrelatedness of all these issues are what truly intrigue me as a scholar. Wulf suggests that the human body, as an object existing in itself, gains experience through perceiving the outside world, from which it can learn. Hence, the duality of the body as a subject and an object, the body and the soul will together characterize "being in a body", as a result of which it can also interpret its own inner world.<sup>7</sup> The different interpretations of the body, in turn, are the result of different historical and cultural processes, the ever-changing factors of which are adaptation in social space, keeping distance, and discipline.<sup>8</sup> In his theoretical explanation, Wulf also refers to the ideas of Bourdieu, Elias, Foucault, Horkheimer, and Adorno related to the body, with the keywords of habits, perception, space, social medium, sensuality, thinking, and dialectics. In her argumentation the body is no longer a text, but it may be defined as a descriptive tool of the culture of society.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, culture cannot be limited to objects and various creations, but it is interpreted as existential experience realized in the

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<sup>3</sup> Wulf 2013: 117.

<sup>4</sup> Kavecsánszki 2020: 80.

<sup>5</sup> Ábrahám 2020: 40.

<sup>6</sup> Royce 2004: 3.

<sup>7</sup> Wulf 2013: 171.

<sup>8</sup> Wulf 2013: 172.

<sup>9</sup> Wulf 2013: 175.

space rooted in the body. Thus, the heterogeneous nature of cultural influences represents bodies that can be interpreted in different cultural systems in terms of their localization.

From the point of view of cultural history, the dancing body belongs to a distinct social space as well as a representative performance space. Meanwhile, several questions arise in connection with this: how many interpretations of physical culture can dance itself represent? Is dance strictly just dance or is it movement and theater? What meanings does the body carry? What effect does dance have on the body? What does the body communicate by dancing?

In this paper, I discuss these mimetic-performing or social body norms and the gesture systems of the body, which I hope clarifies issues related to the interpretation of the body and consequently, the role of dance and the attitude of the performer. The space of the stage, at the same time, also includes the involvement of the outside observer, and thus I also emphasize the impact of stage dance on the spectator.<sup>10</sup> My writing also seeks to reflect on interpretations of body and space as defined by contemporary dance theories, perhaps clarifying the differences in interpretations and facilitating the convergence of differing positions.

## **The Anthropological Study of the Body and Its Use in Dance**

The first key point of my study involves the definition of the body, trying to describe this concept as precisely as possible. According to András A. Gergely, it is such a biological-physical dynamic concept that is the embodiment of the soul, watching itself from the inside.<sup>11</sup> If, however, we wish to specify this further, I would argue that the body is a material object that is symmetrical in its extent, has consciousness, is able to perceive and think. A *perpetuum mobile* that has a soul and can thus become an individual. As Hegel's phenomenology argues, no subject can exist without an object and it is in constant motion. And if it is already moving, we can assume that dance is a phenomenon that makes the body interpretable in space based on its movement. The dancing body is influenced on the one hand by the extrasensory world at the level of the soul (faith), while on the other hand also by consciousness (thinking), and thirdly by desire (experience). It symbolizes, communicates, is in symbiosis with both society and the cultural processes

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<sup>10</sup> Kapitány Á. – Kapitány G. 2008: 397.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gergely 2014: 15.

taking place in society. It is also related to nature, since human actions are determined by the general laws of nature according to Kant.<sup>12</sup> Therefore the body and thus dance realize their role in the dialectical relationship between society and the individual, as supplemented by gender.

My paper mentions sexuality, the display of sensuality in relation to the relational system of bodies. In society, in their ritual relationship, bodies receive a ludic-entertainment function disciplined by morality and ethics, while the body expressing the individual thinks, communicates feelings and becomes an artistic means of expressing culture.<sup>13</sup> Both being ludic and providing entertainment are realized in the space of society also. The involvement of an outside observer, however, also implicates a focused, special space and the crossing of a conventional boundary. The interpretation and embodiment of the body in a cultural context may presuppose a commitment, it may qualify the movement of the body as a focused expressive action.<sup>14</sup> The interpretation of movement presenting the representational possibilities of the body also deserves attention in the contemporary art scene. In the formulation of contemporary dance theory, it focuses on the choreographers and the composition and physical form they create. The basis for it is the dance which is practice and immanent critique articulated in aesthetic form as a created choreography. The artistic process itself is the means and space of critique, which as an experimental space represents the scene of socialization. There are no general rules, however, it accepts the directions of dialectics strictly in terms of thinking and movement. This may always be interpreted only in a specific framework, claiming that with generalization it would lose its unique character.

In her writing, Gabriele Klein characterizes the cultural world of the turn of the century as a crisis of modernity in the epistemological field of dance, however, she does not define either the body or the basic motivational aspects of dance.<sup>15</sup> She refers to the individual formulations of artists, talks about the nature of the process, dramaturgy, aesthetics, compositional structure in connection with dance. At the same time, she states that the combination of theory and practice would represent an opportunity for moving forward with artistic motion. She mentions two basic theoretical distinctions from the point of view of sociology, Bourdieu's theory of practice, and Foucault's field theory from a socio-historical perspective. In Klein's interpretation, practice is a constructed notion of materials describing the

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<sup>12</sup> Kapitány Á. – Kapitány G. 2007: 164.

<sup>13</sup> Csordas 1990: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Csordas 1990: 10.

<sup>15</sup> Klein 2013: 207.

processes of subjectivization oriented towards bodies. The field is the thematization of historical epistemologies and dispositions, which is a self-shaping set of mimetic and performative art techniques.<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu's body definition, however, is more specific than that of Foucault as the latter ignores the physical limitations of the body. Bourdieu attributes cultural, social, and symbolic capital to the body appearing in space. This, in turn, opens up broader perspectives, presupposes cultural competence, a system of customs, the social space itself, and the range of knowledge and understanding in which the body is interpreted on the basis of various rules and regularities.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the theory of practice itself actually argues that the interpretation of the body is determined by a system of gestures and patterns of behavior rooted in the cultural system. The movement of the body cannot be separated from the consciousness, the thoughts and feelings communicated through the movement of the intelligent body that can be interpreted not only through the choreography, but also the technique of the movement.<sup>18</sup> Klein's interpretation relies on Claudia Jeschke's understanding of the body based on choreographic analysis, which considers the formal gestures of ballet to be fundamental.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the question arises as to whether this practicing matter as a body can express itself in an artistic or popular performance in a sociological-social approach. And if it already exists as a form of expression, what can it become, what does it risk? Does it distinguish and designate the personal space of the body, or does it interpret itself in an ever-changing spatial specificity? Can it leave the created field or its own comfort zone and practice self-reflection? Is it just an individual manifestation or a group/social experience? What is the role of the choreographer and that of the choreography in the relationship between material and space? At this point, however, we must also include the space of the theater in the space of body and spatial interpretation, because even in Mejerhold's naturalistic formulation, the body plays a role as an instrument that has artistic value. In his *Empty Space*, Peter Brook poses the following questions in this regard:

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<sup>16</sup> Klein 2013: 210.

<sup>17</sup> Morris 2001: 54.

<sup>18</sup> Morris 2001: 58.

<sup>19</sup> Jeschke 1999: 4–7.

“Is there any language other than the language of words with which the author can express his thoughts with the same precision? Is there a separate language for action, for sounds? Is a sound, a movement, or a rhythm enough to express a feeling and does it have an expressive value? Does it have strength and boundaries?”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the drive for a basic definition of body and movement has become clear, while it has also been revealed what is missing from all of this. The dance-theory work analyzing the body and created by Olga Szentpál at the turn of the century, which is referred to as the “crisis of modernity” by Klein, is in the center of my research.<sup>21</sup> Based on my research, this period cannot be referred to as a crisis, in its social consciousness and ideological expression it can certainly be distinguished from the 60s, but I would certainly not consider it as a period lagging behind of the 60s even. In terms of representation, the artistic aspirations of the turn of the century are examples of performance art, similarly to the 60s, because it is brought to life by the cooperation with related branches of art (such as music, literature, fine arts), their contemporary nature, and the desire for change. What is extraordinary in the system of movement-based analysis formulated by Szentpál is that the motion of the body comes into focus, which is realized on the physical plane of the matter relative to the person. Thus, complemented by cognition and thinking, it may determine the concrete appearance, form, characteristic, manifestation of the body and dance, together with the inner content defining it. This needs to be highlighted because it defines the body, the axes, its range of motion, and the basic sequences of movement from which dance is constructed. For this, it is also necessary to establish the plastic, rhythmic and dynamic functions of the body. It is important to emphasize that Szentpál uses the concept of function as a task defining and regulating the body.

Movement can be interpreted as dance if the movement structure is defined. To be honest, this would already represent a major step in the interpretation of dance and the body, but goes even further when it distinguishes the current dance culture, by dividing it based on the formal characteristics of ballet, ballroom dance, expressionist dance and folk dance. Dance structures that may be found in the social and focused space of both social and stage dance, serving functions of both being entertained and providing entertainment. It is also clear to me that space and the use of space are of particular importance along with everything else that can be included this category, as it is relevant in the context of interpretation. On the one

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<sup>20</sup> Brook 1999: 65.

<sup>21</sup> Klein 2013: 207.

hand, in dance the manifestations of the habits of social behavioral norms related to dance etiquette may be distinguished. On the other hand, it also communicates dominance, primarily in terms of men. The dominant figure of the “leader” communicates important content even when homogeneous bodies appear in space, let them be a group of men or women. The meaning of space changes in the relationship between men and women, fulfilling a function related to gender and identity. Yet another content is associated with it if the body provides entertainment as this is where the use of space becomes central, as it may also have a dramaturgical role here. We should not forget the gesture system acting without speech as mentioned by Brook either, as it also provided a new direction to acting in the wake of his experiments,<sup>22</sup> complemented by the sounds, physical contacts made by the body and opportunities for interpreting various situations, the scenic designation and emphasis of the dominant points of space.

### **The Cultural-Historical Contexts and Functional Analysis of the Gesture Systems of the Body**

The part-whole relationship between body/bodies and social space and the degree of their association with a social class determine the role of culture and change the expression value and functions of its gesture systems.<sup>23</sup> In the context of cultural history, in addition to its ritual functions, we also need to mention those functions of dance and thus the body that are suitable for our own and others’ entertainment. Historical, social and ideological characteristics contribute to the emergence and spread of new systems of bodily gestures, while they may also assume a political overtone, as I will prove later. These means of cultural expression that vary by age and present the phenomenon of dance and appear in separate spaces, represent the symbiosis of social dance and stage dance and their constant source of inspiration. In traditional societies the magic of dance is used in relation to fertility, the rite of hunting, and to establish connections with the supernatural world.<sup>24</sup> In ancient India, it is associated with theater, faith and myths of origin.<sup>25</sup> In this period, in addition to the ritual nature of the dance, dance may also be defined in a sacralized space, also understood as stage dance. Ancient China

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<sup>22</sup> Brook 1999: 68.

<sup>23</sup> Kapitány Á.–Kapitány G. 1995: 619.

<sup>24</sup> Vályi 1969: 28.

<sup>25</sup> Vályi 1969: 45.

differs from this, as the Beijing Opera is for the entertainment of the emperor, which is also a production realized in the stage space.<sup>26</sup> Pantomime acts are used by the Japanese No Theater.<sup>27</sup> In Greek theater, the facial expressions and chironomic hand-gestures, dances set on the rhythmic units of verse which help to visualize the plot of tragedies, condense and structure the performance as stage dance, also play a structuring and narrative role.<sup>28</sup> The word Khoros itself has multiple meanings as it means a group of 12 dancers, it refers to the dance itself (a maze dance according to Plato), singing, and it also indicates the venue of the famous dance form. Pantomime emerged from this as a new form of art and entertainment in ancient Rome.<sup>29</sup> Talking about amusement, aesthetic quality also plays a role this way. Lukianos also defines the basic requirements towards a dancer as entertainer-performer-actor. The dancer is a physically proportioned, rhythmically accurate, expressive artist who can show a mirror, a reflection to the audience.<sup>30</sup> This creates an opportunity to distance oneself from everyday life, whereby not only the performer but the audience also crosses a line. The stage act of the performance permeates the familiar and gives a new meaning not only to the body but also affects the senses.

For the performer, dance and music represent a kind of self-exploration, a means of self-education. At the same time, it also means the creation of a group in society that is “pure” or “mediators” for the performance of dance as a phenomenon. With the advent of the medieval feudal order and Christianity, the distinction of dance as a system of gestures that can be interpreted as social dance gains significance. The nobility already participate in ballroom dances based on moral and behavioral norms articulated by a dance master. Meanwhile, the peasantry retains its earlier ritual dances as a circle dance and an integrated custom of religion, while at the same time, it seeks to imitate the formal dances of the nobility.<sup>31</sup> During the Renaissance, the dance master, as *maestro di ballo*, is involved in dance choreography, teaching, the creation of dance etiquettes and the organization of celebrations. The profession of the dance master makes it possible for universalized-uniformed social dance culture to appear in Western-European societies, together with a set, choreographed form of dance.<sup>32</sup> During the Baroque, era it appears as

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<sup>26</sup> Vályi 1969: 55.

<sup>27</sup> Vályi 1969: 60.

<sup>28</sup> Vályi 1969: 67.

<sup>29</sup> Vályi 1969: 81.

<sup>30</sup> Lukianosz 1974: 759.

<sup>31</sup> Vályi 1969: 87.

<sup>32</sup> Vályi 1969: 103.



court ballet, *baletto*, representing images and astronomical planetary movement and a form of dance with an aspect of entertainment that may also be referred to as stage dance.<sup>33</sup> This later evolves into a form of expression that seeks to show men's technical skills especially, emphasizing the aspiration for moving upwards, dominance, and primarily its Frenchness as *academic ballet*.<sup>34</sup> *Danseur Noble* refers to the category of qualified dancers and performers.<sup>35</sup> In French Rococo, the appearance of ladies, in addition to technical sophistication, contributes to the Renaissance of stage costumes and pantomime.<sup>36</sup> It is turned into *action ballet* by its reliance on Shakespeare's dramaturgy and Lukianos' aesthetics and by placing it above pure technical skills.<sup>37</sup>

During the Enlightenment, the newly arising national dances appeared in balls of the bourgeois as social dances and they become a part of stage dance when they become fashionable and widespread.<sup>38</sup> The popularity of national dances among the bourgeois represented, on the one hand, the political pressure of power, and on the other hand, the opportunity for expressing party affiliations.<sup>39</sup> At the time when *romantic ballet* appeared on the stage, the roles played by men and women were equally dominant, however, in the artistic concept of Romanticism, longing, and Platonic love shifted the main role and style of ballet representation towards women.<sup>40</sup> This is also accompanied by the "cruel torturing" of the female body, as the pointe technique, the absolutely twisted hip and the "artificial" flexibility comes with a terrible sense of pain during body training. Obscuring this, the airy yet fragile artistic charm is idolized in the performance, changing the role of women both in stage dance and social perception. The symbols of rank in the upper social class, preserved as artistic equivalents, as the roles of princes and princesses appear in a prominent position in the stage space. This can be partly explained by the fact that socially the intimate and private spheres, the spaces separating the bodies are becoming more and more distinguished.<sup>41</sup> In her writing, Emese Lafferton refers to Laqueur and notes specifically about the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it marked the restriction of female sexuality expressed in corporeality as a "downgrade" of the role of women. The entertainment

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<sup>33</sup> Vályi 1969: 134.

<sup>34</sup> Vályi 1969: 144.

<sup>35</sup> Vályi 1969: 379.

<sup>36</sup> Vályi 1969: 155.

<sup>37</sup> Vályi 1969: 161.

<sup>38</sup> Vályi 1969: 182.

<sup>39</sup> Kavecsánszki 2015: 56.

<sup>40</sup> Vályi 1969: 203.

<sup>41</sup> Lafferton 1997: 42.

function is moved to a separate space, the spaces of the Orpheum-music hall and the Variety show. The “overtly erotic” female demons occupied a place beyond the boundaries of social morality, which widened the difference in the perception of various women. The woman on stage became the object of male admiration, and the wife was the guardian of social virtue, the cohesive force of the family, and a domestic worker. Why is this so important in connection with dance? Because the “star cult” that develops with prima ballerinas and Platonic love further away from sexuality are concentrated in the personality of the female dancer-performer. It is enough to think of the “instant” but unconsummated love in György Bessenyei’s *Eszterházi vígasságok* with dancer Margherite Delphen.

The assumption of the exclusively entertainment role of stage dance is clearly confirmed by the mimicked but otherwise socially repressed realities of the Cabaret and Operettas as experienced in entertainment. This will downgrade the dancers of the stage genre that focused on the character dances of late Romanticism to the degrading category of “ballet rats” or even “women of questionable morality performing stunts”. The response to this will lie exactly in the declaration of the intellectual, ethical and moral quality of the turn of the century. It becomes necessary to specify the elements of dance and the criteria of the dancers themselves because the role of art needed to be defined precisely, along with the role of women in art, which is formulated as a social need in the writings of Oszkár Jászi.<sup>42</sup> The cultural phenomenon of dance is thus a perfect reflection of the orientations towards the body and society. The diversity of perceptions of the body in different eras generates social perception and the highlighting of its political role. If we think of the turn of the century, body culture in the German cultural milieu of Western Europe can mean an ecstatic dance and body experience based on Sufi philosophy<sup>43</sup>, or the individual formulation of the subject of artistic expression<sup>44</sup>, and thirdly, the differences in political views and concrete positions generated and displayed by society through dance.<sup>45</sup> As a result of historical-cultural exploration in turn-of-the-century Hungary, the latter two have relevance, also clarifying the situation of women at the social level. This was formulated by Olga Szentpál to answer questions that arise in society and to declare her own vocation. This includes the disciplinary association of the

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<sup>42</sup> Jászi 1908: 209.

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Lábán (1879–1958) experiments with motion-experience, in Vojtek 1999: 35.

<sup>44</sup> Regarding the body-technique and formulated works of art of Hungarian movement-artists, the works of Olga Szentpál, Alice Madzsar or Valéria Dienes and István Molnár.

<sup>45</sup> In the ballroom dance of the bourgeois, in addition to national dances, to create “Hungarian” dances and formulate their national aspirations. In Szentpál 1954: 28.

body, defining the movement characteristics of the body, and presenting an approach to dance culture as a whole that features characters of both stage dance and ballroom dancing.

Taking these factors into account, in the anthropological study of the already mentioned dance structures and bodily gesture systems, this will bring different results in the interpretation of stage dance and that of ballroom dance or folk dance. In stage dance, technique, conscious movement, and expressiveness come to the forefront, pushing sexuality into the background (similarly to the appearance and control of a dominant role in same sex group dances). In ballroom dancing, it is exactly sensuality that comes to the fore, as it is about the contact of men and women as bodies, which is accompanied by the technical execution of dance, decency and identity, which is realized within the framework of a social event. While individual performance involves self-expression, choreography, aesthetic quality and performance, ballroom dancing emphasizes the leading role of the male and the adapting role of the female dancer and in this context stresses the emotional relationship and dialogue of dating and attraction, which is further enhanced by technical skills and performance. In stage dance, and especially in ballet or in the emergence of motion art at the turn of the century, there is little physical contact, instead adaptation and formalities by the performer come to the fore. Ballroom dancing, on the other hand, abounds in it, the repertoire involves not only the touches of the hands, but also the holding of the arms, and embracing of the partner. In terms of performance, the hip plays a characteristic role, while the use of the arms is more of a balancing and aesthetic element complementing body movement, which can also reflect social affiliation. The dances of the peasantry are not characterized by clearly raised arms, as it is allowed only for the higher social class by the arm position standards in the dance structure of ballet. The coordination and independence of the movements of the arms and legs can already be defined as criteria for the dancers' qualification and a sense of understanding of movement. The dancing body may seem awkward without the proper and appropriate use of the arm and appear uncoordinated in the expression of the bodily gesture system. The style of German expressionist dance, Hungarian motion art or American modern dance differ from one another in body planes and axes with regard to the bodily gesture system. Modern dance is a form of body and space use in contact with the ground. Movement controlled from the solar plexus with the techniques of *contraction and release*<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Fuchs 2007: 83.

and *fall and recovery*<sup>47</sup> with the gesture of spiral twisting and dropping. It presents the physicality of the body and its postures in contact with the ground, rolling on it, it shows a sharply different kind of body perception than the bodily gesture systems discussed earlier. Sensuality is not relevant in this regard. The body and the contact contexts of the bodies play a central role guided by strength and momentum.

In terms of American modern dance, it is much more a sense of physical representation than an inner work that articulates a spiritual event. This style of dance, which expresses spiritual events was formulated by the creative performers of the German Expressionist School and Hungarian motion art. I see the proof for this in the fact that the performers of the German Expressionist School and Hungarian motion art formulated their own objectives and motivations and built their dance training systems on a definite theoretical basis. These systems focus on consciousness in the body-soul-spirit system in the primary position, which must be born in the performer herself/himself on the stage. The multitude of ludic and entertainment functions of bodily gesture systems have become visible as constantly changing and taking on expressive value in various cultural historical eras and social classes. Therefore, André Lepecki may be right about the style of modern dance in the entertainment category when he claims that it is only able to develop and survive for a while and unless it is able to renew itself, it becomes exhausted.<sup>48</sup> But can this be called exhaustion or is it more of a border crossing or a redefinition?

### **Is Individuality a Body, Sensuality or Identity?**

When defining the individual, the attitude of the body needs to be defined also in terms of its appearance in social space, its relation to other bodies, and its role as technically trained or untrained. The training and discipline of the body was considered a virtue already in the court culture of the nobility in the late Middle Ages. And once dance is considered a virtue, according to the dance masters, those who dance “are not poor but beautiful”<sup>49</sup>. In Italian Renaissance, with the emergence of the title of the dance master, dance and etiquette in line with the Neoplatonist approach were primarily used in the

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<sup>47</sup> Fuchs 2007: 87.

<sup>48</sup> Lepecki 2014: 236.

<sup>49</sup> Vályi 1969: 103.

service of the nobility.<sup>50</sup> Thus, not only social segmentation and dress, but even dance skills were used as indicators of distinction. Ballroom dances are characterized by a compliment or kiss initiating the dance, which indicates a courtesy function.<sup>51</sup> Thus, courtship itself becomes a social event intertwined with dance. The appearance and displayability of the individual is not yet part of the body's toolbox, but is already shaped by adaptation and formality in relation to body and space. The individual appears only in productions presenting independent performance, it becomes visible in space for the specific era and society. The ethnic belonging of the body in social space becomes a determining factor as part of this, together with the assumption of identity, the legitimate right of its independence as a character.<sup>52</sup> The area that shapes the personality and also shows its expression will simultaneously become dance and theater, body and space, self-fulfilling performance and/or national interest. With the appearance of the entertainment and dominance function on the male body, this process may not be as spectacular as in the changes taking place on the female body.<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of the female body, this involves a myriad of change strategies in social perception or acceptance regulations and roles. The training of the body and stage dance are formed into a form of self-expression in the social and entertainment activities of high culture at the courts.

The cohesive power of the peasantry is equally represented by dance and organized dance events, which serve as entertainment opportunities and social events of the village community. The strongest regulatory system is heritage and tradition, which at the same time reforms itself in a slowly but steadily changing acculturation process by partially or temporarily merging dance fashions.<sup>54</sup> They are not trained dancers, but all members of the community must dance because it is a duty defined as a criterion of belonging to the community. In terms of the dynamics of the village community, an exception is made only if the community for some reason expels and punishes a person who violates the written or unwritten rules of the community.<sup>55</sup> In village society, gaining a position in outstanding cases may also be generated by dance skills. This is how especially skilled dancers became legendary dancers and formed dance dynasties, whose favorite dances could

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<sup>50</sup> Vályi 1969: 101.

<sup>51</sup> Vályi 1969: 102.

<sup>52</sup> Szentpál 1954: 26.

<sup>53</sup> Szentpál describes men's "not so sanguine but more choleric" character with a highly extroverted leading role. Szentpál 1954: 43.

<sup>54</sup> Kavecsánszki 2015: 75.

<sup>55</sup> Pesovár 1978: 58.

even survive as independent dance types.<sup>56</sup> There is, however, a process in the peasant dance culture as well that precedes young adulthood, when the mimicked movements must “become part of the dancer” during practice while guarding cattle or hiding in behind the barn, forming and adapting the village’s dance gesture system to reveal their own talent.<sup>57</sup> This transformation process takes place at around the age of 11–16 before reaching the age of marriage. This is followed by another boundary or initiation rite when growing up and entering adulthood with marriage and by this time already assuming a role of controlling the behavior of the youth. Role changes within the community make up the closed yet changing world of the village community resembling a slowly grinding mill. This boundary or rite of passage is also associated with the attendance of balls and reaching the military age. The young people of the bourgeois and the aristocratic nobility learn the universal dance fashion (that culturally meant the dance standard accepted at the Habsburg court) at the dance school from the dance masters. It has the same function of entering social life as in peasant society.

Balls are linked to the Enlightenment and the national fashion of ballroom dancing may be interpreted as a symbol of national independence or identity, which is why it is not closely tied to the representation of the individual. In a uniformed dance culture, the national dance expressing Hungarian identity with the *verbunk* style is based on the social spaces of balls and the theater.<sup>58</sup> Ballroom dancing becomes part of basic education, enabling participation in social events. In the Reform Era, the concept of the individual already has a political overtone with the creation and social impact of “Hungarian” dance, and it may clearly be referred to as a symbol of isolation and independence. Actors are the first dancers of the Reform Era to create “national” or rather “Hungarian” dance as they had already become skilled dancers who studied ballet in the theater.<sup>59</sup> This style of dance which may be described as the pedestal of masculinity is born and made fashionable in the circles of the gentry-bourgeois social class and this also appears in the space of the stage.<sup>60</sup> After the Compromise, it passes from the gentry to the peasantry as a rite of passage and as a virtuous formula beginning a dance.<sup>61</sup> It also intertwines

<sup>56</sup> Examples include Bábó’s *verbunk* (*Vámosmikola*), Bertók’s *verbunk* (*Szigetköz*), Ádám Bene’s *verbunk* (*Kiskunhalas*), Sallai’s *verbunk* (*Kéménd*) and Porkolábos dance (*Tiszadob*). Communicated by Pesovár 1978: 11.

<sup>57</sup> Kaposi–Maác 1958: 108.

<sup>58</sup> Szentpál 1954: 9.

<sup>59</sup> Szentpál 1954: 10; Kaán 1989: 33.

<sup>60</sup> Szentpál 1954: 15.

<sup>61</sup> Vályi 1969: 189.

with musicality, as *verbunkos* music had appeared before the dance in the composition of Márk Rózsavölgyi.

If I were to compare dance and music from the perspective of the individual and interpretation, some connections in terms of Classicism-Romanticism-Art Nouveau also become clear. I would point out a few letters of difference between two musical terms, *cadenza* and *cadence*. While *cadenza* used in Classicism involves free interpretation, improvisation at or near the close of a movement of a composition, *cadence* refers to a strict closing. In the musical form of Romanticism, there is no such freedom anymore, and playing the tunes of the piece of music precisely and the ability of interpretation become key objectives. Dance as an educational tool and a uniformed style of partner dance culture is without free improvisation during this period, which is more characteristic of folk dance. With the emergence of the artistic trends of Art Nouveau at the turn of the century and the pursuit for self-realization and free self-expression, the body is viewed as a natural ornament and the focus shifts to the skills of interpretation and improvisation. The theoretical foundations of art will be the subject of study among representatives of German idealist philosophy in the context of the natural body and thinking. The invention by Dalcroze of a technique that helps people to understand the musical structure and musicians to improve their posture and better understand the rhythm, becomes a specific dance style and becomes the basis of the expressionist school. It becomes linked with the paramount importance of natural thinking and women's education at the societal level.<sup>62</sup> This is why for Pina Bausch, the most unique but already contemporary artist emerging from the further development of the school of German expressionism, the dancer is the center of knowledge and the work of art is self-knowledge, theater, and interpretation all at once.

## **Body and Theatre**

Theater is a form of expression that assumes the function of entertainment and endows the body with communicative value in space. It is therefore a space involving conscious border crossing that is a critical reflection of the body of society. Empty space provides the body with innumerable opportunities for communication. The bodily gesture language expands here, in addition to movement, it also includes the sounds made by/with the body, such as punching, beating, clapping, or physical conflict in the interaction of

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<sup>62</sup> Ábrahám 2020: 41.

bodies, which is highlighted and made meaningful by silence and stillness. The actor's job is to make a character of the person embodied that reveals exactly what the director expects. This, according to Brook, does not begin with the learning of words, but one must find the wordless pantomime movement from which and based on which the speaking character himself/herself can be construed. The body and the interpretation of the body in the world of theater always consider the principles that prevail in society to be the basis, for which it must add aesthetic quality (as we are talking about a special event put on stage). The actors generate a gesture language from the basic conflict of the understood act, thus making their individual struggles visible in the space presented to society as an involved outside observer.<sup>63</sup> This, however, may be traced to a social counterpoint. Namely that the "comedian" is always "on the move", thus they always live at or outside the periphery of society. Theater and the comedians who create and implement it represent a social group that live according to well-defined and observed, yet unwritten laws.<sup>64</sup> Theater, for them, represents their body, soul, and their life. Bodies moving in space and body contacts are always filled with meaningful content, making impressions on the audience. "Brechtian" alienation as a situation provokes the spectator and makes them think. It is the body filled with communicative content that shapes its role through posture and gestures. It may be popular and accessible for everyone and at the same time serving political interests, but in this case, in Brook's words, we are talking about "dead" theater.<sup>65</sup> It may be a dissonant, acting, and raw subcultural revelation full of wit, which is much more interesting and it is more of a theater expressing life and the human nature of people than a mirror of society. The latter may be the "voice of the people" which, because of its bare honesty, speaks directly to the outside observer, who will identify with it exactly because of this pure form of expression. In the process of creation, therefore, the creator has a knife in one hand that figuratively cuts into the flesh of society's body, and a stethoscope in the other monitoring the heart rate to make sure the body is alive, seeking and living the experience of change and alteration.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Brook 1999: 106.

<sup>64</sup> Brook 1999: 138.

<sup>65</sup> Brook 1999: 8.

<sup>66</sup> Brook 1999: 114.



The intensity of the emotional content is closely intertwined with the cool thought and dialectical, controversial arguments, otherwise the already very delicate balance that characterizes the acting theater would be upset. If the seed of thought is not planted, which can take root and develop into the stem in the outside observer, the viewer will remain “hungry” and leave frustrated. The expressive content of the action reflects social truth, which does not radiate conviction, but rather the desire for change that the situation presented may somehow be resolved. On the stage, naked, bare souls shine in the representation of the body but nudity is not about bareness, it is about authenticity.<sup>67</sup> This may be raw and sharp, but by no means “pleasantly mannered” or trivially simple. The space of the stage does not celebrate the “consubstantial ego” but the lonely, acting hero who must always show most humanity towards society when it is least experienced by it. Truth and development always appear and promise a hopeful future with the representative death of the ego and self-interest, with the stoic calmness inherited from Seneca. This is why the petrified stereotypes are the ones that make the body dead along with everything it wants to communicate.

The symbolism and meaning of all the elements we bring onto the stage space come with a responsibility. It is just as much a space for positioning society as it is for displaying dispositions. A good example for this is provided by turn-of-the-century France and Paris in particular. The modern Russian ballet with its novel ideals and excellent choreographic attitudes is stationed there. The body interpretation that renews rites and sensuality outrages society accustomed to the entertaining nature of romantic ballet.<sup>68</sup> But this company also has a rival that emphasizes the peculiarities of national character and puts social groups on the periphery of society in the focus of art on the stage in the creative attitude of Swedish ballet.<sup>69</sup> Interests, marks, bodies, “evolutionist animal-like sexuality” interpreted in planar spaces, deviant costumes, reformed, recreated gesture systems, modern music, and theatrical traditions confront each other in the contemporary artistic concept. This also enters Hungarian dance life, building on newer formal and national stylistic solutions. As for the interpretation of the body and space, drawing the fundamental boundary is an essential moment in relation to interpretability. The fact and awareness of crossing borders is significant because it calls attention and highlights the borders left behind. The fact of transcendence must be conscious so that a new frontier or convention may be born

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<sup>67</sup> Brook 1999: 121.

<sup>68</sup> Fuchs 2007: 49.

<sup>69</sup> Fuchs 2007: 58.

from it, legitimizing its own role in a canonical rearrangement.<sup>70</sup> Sensuality is not dominant on stage only and exclusively in the contact of bodies or objects symbolizing the body. The naked body may be a rebellion if it has meaning. For me, the extravagant relationship between the body and the skin covering the body became clear during my university years when listening to Judit Gombár's lectures on the history of culture. In her works, Gombár formulated a unique body interpretation in her costumes made for ballet performances. For her, the beauty, shape and aesthetic quality of the body served as the basis, which she complemented, made visible and hinted at with her superbly tailored costumes. Nudity was a tool for her just as much as a material that best supported the shape and form of the body and the dance. The unique eroticism of the body is most evident in this respect, as it is much more exciting to see only a part or even just a silhouette having to imagine it than presenting it in its full reality to the spectator. However, it has become so common in modern theatre that it has lost its original role. If the viewer can decide what to think, what to conceive of the body, and how to evaluate the production seen, it becomes overtly subjective.

Looking at a body from the outside, "in its naked reality", I have also experienced this while sitting in the audience and watching the reactions of those around me. One old gentleman looked for the gender characteristics of the body and the "possibility of insight," the other wanted to see how cared for the body hair was, while the third looked for the signs of abdominal fat. And I, who thought that I understood modern theater, left with eyes wide open and "hungry" because I was waiting for the developed ideas, smooth acting, that didn't even require a clearly understood composition. I, too, have only understood now that this naked, fatty body is the prison of the soul that, in the "swirl of lipids," circles around itself, and this has been built for it by society that also imprisoned it. It lost touch with nature and itself in the rush of civilization, rolling towards something without seeing its legs and that is no longer clearly understood as good or bad, self-proclaimed contemplation disguised as progress. In the same way, a grotesque body revelation may be a self-seeking body perception, a dissection and twisting of the body, a simulating body mosaic of legs and arms, the lack of heart, mind, thought, and soul, as well as its instinctive nature.

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<sup>70</sup> Kékesi Kun 2006: 75.

## **Is Choreography the Critique of the Choreographer or That of Society?**

The role of the choreographer is a complex one according to the historical-cultural approach. Through dance as a tool, s/he not only communicates a social position and current artistic perception, but also needs to express an individual opinion. In this respect s/he also chooses a political stance as to what interests, morals or moral values the interpretation of the communication implies or confronts. Choreography is the symbolic and formal application of this and it is also a composition structured in its buildup and use of space, as well as in its spatial form. Symmetry always carries a safe, easy-to-understand, and well-positioned meaning. Asymmetry, however, is a system of rules of confusion that is always in search of harmony, compositional balance and therefore represents a raw-wild-relative acting attitude. Using the scenic tools of light, it makes the dynamic points of space convex or concave, focusing on the body within it. Symmetry is a representative showcase and asymmetry is a revolution in experiment. The center-positioned box-stage of the stone theater is purposefully dominant, the experimental theater created from “nothing” is the “creativity of the universe”. The creative choreographer acts as the director, who may be the dancer him/herself, similarly to the Renaissance dance masters.

At this point let me highlight the essential difference between European and American cultural perceptions. In Europe, culture represents something “sacred”, it embodies the profound creative force of virtues, social problems, feelings, innovation and discovery, and the individual talent of the character. As opposed to this, the American approach considers the instinctiveness of ordinary gestures to be fundamental, which, like in the case of Pavlov’s dog, is based on conditioning. As a deep conviction, it also claims that they invented and discovered it, even if it can be proven that the phenomenon may have appeared or existed in other cultures before.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the responsibility of the dancer’s cultural representation is the task and duty of the choreographer or director. This is why it is important to train creative and performing people as expressed by the German Expressionist School and the Hungarian motion art, who are familiar with the rules of the body and space, and consciously turn towards creation and performance. For them, dance and creation are not only a physical task to be performed, but to “give birth” to a work and perform it is also an inner spiritual-emotional task. Meanwhile, the etic attitude of the outside observer should represent the critique. A space of

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<sup>71</sup> Brook 1999: 157.

discussion confronting points of view, arguments, styles, which praises or condemns the work. This is important also from the sense that the role of criticism is dominant in terms of acceptance by society. If criticism is good, the performance stays in the program, making people curious and eager to watch, rate, or possibly become fans of it. If it is shocked and arrogant or over-positioned, people will lose interest in the topic as there is no motivation for it. It generates at most anger and dislike, which in turn equates to a death sentence. It would therefore be important for the critic's work to articulate values as well while standing on the ground of reality, of course, while also mentioning problems, because the critic wraps his/her own subjective opinion into words, which raises the question of what their purpose is. Does it serve the cultural benefit and development of society or the critic, or does it position power?

### **Possibilities for the Survival of the Body and Movement**

The bodily gesture systems presented so far all have their own specific flaws. As they are created by humans and not machines, they may strive for perfection and can be perfect in imperfection. The formulation of the concept of skilled and unskilled was made as a performing attitude. Training is the arena that must consciously utilize the assets and traditions of the body's gesture systems and at the same time make the receptive space formable on a cultural level. By this I also mean understanding the system of relations between "knowing somewhat" and "collective knowledge", the practical understanding of techniques. If we think only of the art of movement, motion art: how many different representations exist? The generic development of body movement always focuses on the body's gesture system. Within this space, it always needs to use the right technique, style or gesture system, from which it creates its own technique that also expresses individuality. Using the ideas and definitions of Olga Szentpál, motion art borrows the aesthetic quality of ballet, the physical contact and social relationship of ballroom and folk dance, and also uses the body as an instrument, the pantomimic gesture system of soul expression. She is not alone in this respect in motion art. If we look for points of connection with pantomime, we can find the unique art of Cilli Wang and Ellen Tels, or Gertrud Kraus, in which it plays a role.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For example, they are not listed as performers in Hungarian dance history. Karl Toepfer writes about them in *Empire of Ecstasy* published in 1997.

Among those practicing the art of movement, there was a relatively large number of people who were persecuted for their origins, who had to flee those parts of Europe where the categorizing theories of National Socialism triumphed. Survival, however, remained an option, and the aesthetic dimensions of their art led the body and its movement towards another stylistic formality. At this point we need to mention Ohad Naharin and Gaga as a style, Marcel Marceau, who grew up on Étienne Decroux's school that looked at the material corpus as a tool, and the manipulation of objects he invented, as well as rhythmic gymnastics, physiotherapy represented by Sára Berczik, or for that matter artistic gymnastics as interpreted by Ágnes Keleti. Perhaps it is even more interesting how this genre found its way back to Hungary after the Holocaust and the loosening of ideological barriers. It was my aunt, Elizabeth Abraham (whom everyone knows as Tücsi), who told me about this as she was an active performer during this period.<sup>73</sup> During her years of studying at the Teacher-Training College, she often went to the University Theater, where she liked Miklós Köllő's pantomime performances the most, which represented a progressive-alternative line. In Prague, Miklós Köllő learned the technique of pantomime from Vladislav Fialka, which he also taught in Budapest.

In the late 70s, the young intellectuals of Budapest attended exhibitions and concerts together, where performance art was frequently present. She was an active participant of the performance art actions of *Dr. Újhajnal*, i.e., Sándor Bernath Y., where they performed as a "transconservative" band under the name of *Okker Szisztersz, Női Lépték*, or even *King Fingersz* or *Matuska Szilverbend*. From the beginning of the 1980s, my aunt joined the András M. Kecskés *Corpus* pantomime ensemble. This was followed in 1984 by the establishment of the movement theater department of the Katona József Theater in Kecskemét where they worked together with Gábor Goda under the leadership of István Malgot. The first recognition of the success of their joint work with Goda was embodied by the audience's award of the *Déjavu* choreography at the New Dance Competition of Budapest. These performances and the genre of pantomime itself had a definite political weight and aspect. *Artus Theater* was established as a result of this, which was built on the results of József Nagy, who taught what he studied from Marceau in France at home, transforming it into a new genre. And this is by no means different in its ideals from the art of movement. The movement theater of the silent body in which my aunt played Pierrot. She was the sad clown, who stands in front of the audience with sadness condensed into gags,

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<sup>73</sup> I am sharing these memories with the permission of my aunt, Elizabeth Abraham.

and yet with a pure heart and a naked soul. She lived in Vienna since the birth of her son in 1987. She helped his friends countless times to come up with new ideas and inspired them at the “gate of the guilty imperialist West.” For her, the idea always represented the foundation of the work and the expression of creativity. I always looked up at her for being able to step back from the stage for freedom, build a children’s theater from scratch, and finding a new role and form of expression for herself. She provided the base and the connection between “East and West” when it came to learning about new artistic trends. This serves not only as evidence of a mixture of genres, but also for stating the fact that not only American modern dance represents contemporary dance art in Hungary. The idea and style of motion art did not die, it only found a different form of manifestation.<sup>74</sup>

## Summary

Based on those aspects listed in this paper, it is clear that dance represents ideas, modes of body interpretation, and social attitudes born out of the body within the dialectical system of society and the individual. It is necessary to limit the body with axes, endow it with aesthetic qualities, natural dynamics and place it within an epistemological dimension, making the inner and outer space of the body visible also, because dance, as a form of behavior of the body, may be interpreted truly only in the context of the historical-cultural dimensions of society. The body disciplines itself in the process of socialization, acquires a “basic education”, and learns to orient itself in the space imposed by society. It has to learn to express itself and participate in joint action. It can move on symbolically, if it is trained and becomes a dancer, with performing arts becoming its vocation. The stylistic change of development and gesture systems of the body lies in the conscious transgression of conventional boundaries, be it the interpretation of the body or movement, a generic peculiarity. In the space of the stage, the body may become a mimicked poser and an instrument transcending with a bare soul. It may as well be a familiar-adapting sensual object in society or an individual wishing to

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<sup>74</sup> Let me note that productions and performers that reached the standard of movement art also appeared in the New Circus or Tribal fusion belly dance categories. The New Circus displays body and object manipulation, and the tribal belly dance reevaluated body consciousness by presenting the body in a novel form with the independence of movement centers. As a prominent performer of the New Circus, I must mention the artistic gesture system and peculiar theatrical formal language of Linda Farkas (1980–2016), who died tragically early.

reveal him/herself. Culture or art is inseparable from both the body and society, it represents a compelling need for transcendence. As a pure source, it makes you thirsty, offering an opportunity for renewal this way. The “national strive” assumes community and identification with society and the body, bringing art closer to the body as an understandable and familiar community space, and offers new ways of representation. Clinging to bodily appearances, insistence on rigid idols is a form of distancing from change. The relationship and degree of connection between body-bodies and the social part-whole relationship of space serves as evidence for the role of culture and its constant reinterpretation.<sup>75</sup> The change and conscious alteration of tradition and expression, body-soul, object-subject, asymmetry-symmetry, space and theory, fashion and etiquette play the key role on the stage of dance and bodies. We should not focus on the creative habit of personalities, but on defining, evaluating and interpreting the dancing body and follow it through space and its historical-cultural transformation. As my writing proves, the body always wears the current cultural mark of the given historical era on itself, irrespective of whether it is entertaining itself or providing entertainment. Leaving the comfort zone takes place when body and dance take the stage, as it changes its rules as not everyone in the space is active and moves at the same time, but processes what is seen by the external observer. Thus dance and movement represent a social body norm with an emic attitude reflecting on the internal processes of society. High culture communicates through the gesture systems of the body and creates opportunities for manifestation (functions and structures) in various strata of society, thereby also generating subcultural counterpoints within itself. Therefore, it is the dialectical system of society and the individual that changes the culture of the body with its power and by moving beyond its limits.

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<sup>75</sup> Kapitány Á.–Kapitány G. 1995: 619.

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