

Note:

The following essay was written in the early 1990s. Parts of it have appeared in different form in other publications, but the essay appears here in its entirety. -Marcia B. Siegel @2007

Rethinking Movement Analysis

Marcia B. Siegel

One September night in 1991 postmodernist Yoshiko Chuma inaugurated a series of informal performances at New York's Judson Church, sponsored by the downtown organization Movement Research. After talking for a while about the importance of Judson in the history of new dance, Chuma reported that she really didn't feel like dancing. The world situation was so terrible that she was overwhelmed by her feelings, and rather than dance about them, she had to talk instead. Finally, with obvious effort, she worked up a ten-minute improvisation.

This strange little scenario symbolizes many potent issues for dancing and dance criticism, but the particular one I want to focus on is an apparent loss of faith in the power of the nonverbal. Since the 1960s America has been engulfed in two great revolutions, one technological and one social. Though they have at times intersected, they are very different in their effects on art and culture. The technological revolution produced irreversible changes in the ways we communicate. What we know is shaped by the phenomenal speed and volume at which information can be transmitted, by the vastly increased capabilities for input and storage of information, by the substitution of visual images for verbal description, and by the increasing difficulty of identifying the source of intelligence. Real life, especially

public life, is becoming more and more telegenic and theatricalized; performance models itself more and more on real life. In politics, media, and education, we are increasingly the target of reductive onslaughts of material—ideas simplified, glamorized and hyped for their thrill-inducing values. We aren't required to examine ideas but to consume them. We aren't invited to appreciate or be transported by art but to endorse it.

The social revolution opened up our culture to the nonverbal. In a climate that promoted sexual liberation, a suspicion of intellectualizing, a distrust of one-sided histories, dance found many new allies. Bounding off the stage, flinging away its theatricality, dance emerged as a central metaphor of the counterculture. A discipline that anyone could learn for physical pleasure and health, dance became the basis of therapies and other techniques for releasing feelings and facilitating psychic growth. We thought we were embarking on the long-desired reintegration of body and mind, and dance was a living example.

In later stages, these two revolutions began to trip one another up, and now the split has reopened. We live in an age of quick-fix information transfer. In art, literature, journalism and media, we're handed labels, buzzwords, bytes, fragmentary and often clashing images, and expected to "get it." We have no time, we're allowed no time, for contemplation, inquiry, debate. Ironically, movement sophistication has prepared us for this. We can "read" images, appearances, gestures; and the political groomers and managers understand this frighteningly well. Elections are won and lost on the basis of whether the candidate appears confident, restrains his impulse to bite his nails, keeps his eyes focussed like an honest person, and plays/eats/jokes with the right ethnic groups. This is the kind of climate that fosters the most corrupt forms of journalism and criticism.

Dance and dance writing in the 90s seem to have regressed to positions even more absolutist than what the counterculture rebelled against. Dance has become politicized, which in our culture is to say it has become propagandistic. Those competing histories must all be heard, but are they all true? Who is the power behind the tellers of history, and what power do the tellers seek to exercise over others? Can the histories be told at all if the narrators are stifled by economics or by censorship? We must be egalitarian; we mustn't make judgments. Everyone is right; no one is right.

When the artist becomes preoccupied with political issues, the impulse to dance and to work on the materials of dance becomes paralyzed. Instead dancers put their efforts into sharpening the weapons of persuasion. With polished theatrical techniques, disorienting mixtures of styles, beguiling and coercive languages, they want to provoke and cajole and sometimes bully the audience into conformist responses to narrowly defined questions. This politicizing of the audience puts great pressure on the critic to act as conduit for the performers' messages. We're expected to grind their axes, promote their causes. Otherwise we risk being stigmatized as biassed, power-hungry, or formalist.

Meanwhile, the academic world has been largely overtaken by post-structuralist theory and by arguments about the viability of Western civilization. Critics and artists, particularly avant-gardists, have been drawn into these lines of thinking, if only because so many of them work for much of their lives in the university. Lacking a substantial intellectual history of its own, dance has been especially responsive to the heady exploits of literary theory and post-structuralism. These other disciplines may offer models for systematic study where the systematic study of dance has eluded acceptance. Besides opening up dance to a larger context, the fields of literary and film

criticism, anthropology, feminist theory, psycholinguistics have a much firmer foothold in the academic world than the sparsely populated and underpublished ranks of dance studies. One of the most puzzling aspects of this situation is that these disciplines propose themselves as instruments for studying world cultures, despite their own origins in the Euro-American intellectual mainstream. Dance scholars, scrambling not to be left behind again, seem ready to trade in their movement knowledge and proceed straight to "meaning" without consciously considering movement at all.

In reality, the best art is a fusion of techniques and ideas, verbal and nonverbal, images, sensations and meanings. Good criticism represents a similar interplay, a fluid back-and-forth interaction of perception, imagination, knowledge, and verbal skills. If we abandon the nonverbal mode as a source of information about dance, as well as a source of catharsis, we not only revert to the inhibited attitudes of the pre-liberation period, we bypass once again the particular nature of dance. It seems incredible to me that we have to reassert what I'd hoped we proved long ago, that dance is unique because of its nonverbal nature, and that dance's perpetual low status within the arts and the culture is largely due to the difficulty of bringing this material into awareness, where its power can be considered, its efficacy acknowledged.

For me, all the conceivable uses of criticism require movement narrative. Even political, "intellectual" dance relies on movement content. The critic of dance needs to capture and convey how movement works together with everything else in a performance to produce the image, sensation, or idea. The critic is the one who can say what gives dancers, choreographies, and styles their identity. The critic can say how dance communicates as well as what it says. I've never left out this movement

narrative in my writing. It is the thread that keeps me interested in dance when all the themes, messages and techniques blur and become the same.

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To reassure the reader that movement does matter has always been my goal as a critic. When I became interested in doing dance criticism in the 1960s, it seemed to me that very little dance criticism, or any other dance literature, enlightened me on that subject. Before I would attempt criticism, I needed to understand movement, and to learn how to observe and write about movement. I had never wanted to be a dancer and I didn't think the specific knowledge of one dance technique would adequately prepare me to understand all movement. I heard about Laban movement analysis (then called Effort/Shape) and I felt it would be just what I wanted—an exploration of the principles of movement and an intensive training in movement observation. This turned out to be the case. I got what I expected from the program and much more. Not the least of the unexpected dividends was realizing belatedly how much I enjoyed moving.

But it was clear to me at the outset that the Laban system would have to be adapted for the purposes of criticism. In 1968, when I began my studies, movement analysis was in its infancy, but it had and continues to have its primary applications in the teaching of movement quality to dancers and in identifying movement elements (lacking or desired) in a therapeutic situation. Both of these occupations require a high degree of observational skill and the ability to make fine discriminations between individual movers and between discrete, non-recoverable movement events. But unlike criticism, neither of them usually attempts to synthesize observed phenomena in written form for general readers. Although research was going on all the time, Laban experts seldom published their findings, and there has

continued to be a low priority within the Laban group for publishing applications of the system such as in-depth dance criticism or studies of dance styles.

Laban theory is based on certain principles that underlie all human movement. A person in any movement activity is coping with the physical realities of weight, space, and time, as well as with the physique of the body itself. The mover's conscious or unconscious intensification of any aspect of weight, space, time, or tension gives a dynamic quality to the action, which is communicated to the observer. All movement is unique and personal, as the individual makes choices not only about what to do but how to do it. Dance teaching and therapy, together with sports medicine, which became another important venue for practitioners of movement analysis, assume there is a movement vocabulary (technique) or a behavioral context, a set of norms, that defines optimum performance. This vocabulary can be enriched or changed, and can in fact only be realized through a full range of movement qualities.

Criticism, as I wanted to do it, had no easily referenced framework into which this qualitative information could be inserted, although the systematic consideration of these qualities greatly enhanced the process of observing dance. I wanted to write about all kinds of dance, nonhierarchically, not as if any one type was more important than any other. I was determined to find alternatives to the kind of writing that sees classicism as an absolute standard for technical excellence and aesthetic pleasure. I didn't regard modern dance or experimental dance as undeveloped substitutes for ballet, or nonwestern forms as descending in sophistication the further they diverged from European classical criteria. I

wanted to find out what made each form special in its own terms. I couldn't presume to know those terms before I saw the dance.

So language was the first problem to be solved. Converting the workaday Laban terms into more subtle and expressive words seemed essential to good descriptive writing. The technical terms used by Laban teachers (strong/light, quick/slow, direct/indirect, free/bound) were always assumed to have everyday substitutes, "forceful" for "strong" for example. But I began looking for ways to combine quality with action—verbs that have both an activity and the "how" of activity within them—and the economy of this practice also suited the space limitations of journalism. When I began teaching critics in 1970, I deliberately augmented the Laban terminology with words that expressed the range of each quality and, as much as possible, the activity itself. Strong movement can be aggressive, adamant, laborious. When you haul something heavy, you use strength in a different way from prying open a can.

Journalists who weren't intimately attuned to movement didn't readily relate the Laban concepts to whatever they were seeing on a stage. The system's basic ideas, although ostensibly simple, are not that easy to learn. Besides their deliberately reductive focus on distinguishing the main dynamic and spatial patterns of movement, they contain certain contradictions that can only be resolved through long study. In the 1990 *LMA Compendium* ² one of the five definitions of the weight factor associates strength with muscular tension, lightness with muscular relaxation. A student of LMA can spend considerable time disentangling this idea from the tension inherent in the flow factor (free/bound). This example also displays the cultural—and hence value-laden—connections that LMA makes between its descriptive tools and their application in real life. Tension

and relaxation in themselves imply certain values, but Laban further associated strength with fighting, resisting; and lightness with yielding, accepting or indulging in the body's weight. These affinities pervade the whole LMA system, infecting even Laban's space scales with their masculine/feminine dichotomizing.*

Most dance critics will not have the time to learn this system in its entirety so that they can unravel its mysteries and evaluate them. My earliest problems in teaching it came from deciding which aspects of the system were most useful and, beyond that, how to make the concepts operable in an uncomplicated way. Learning the effort qualities in more or less pure form puts the critic in a bind. She might tend to zero in on these qualities and then write on a fairly primitive level of description: the dancer enters slowly, stops, makes a strong lunge to the side, etc. Or the observer might lose track of the discrete qualities altogether in the overwhelming complex of stimuli that constitutes the experience of watching a dance. In my teaching I began to focus on the sequence and content of movement events, rather than isolated movement qualities. One day I shocked a group of Laban people by pointing out what I thought was obvious: movement quality isn't movement. It is always embedded in an action, and can't be talked about apart from the physical act that frames it.

Having decided that I was not going to teach pure Laban theory or language, I felt I could add things that weren't covered by the Laban system, and even things that are sometimes strictly ruled out. In the 1970s I began teaching the whole range of the Laban factors (weight, space and time), including the center—the neutral, passive, or nonfunctional aspects which early Laban theory held to be negatives. I realized that, although Labanese is thought to identify the basic elements of all movement, some of its teachers,

including my own, the late Irmgard Bartenieff, valued the core Laban qualities higher than other movement phenomena that don't conform to them. Highly active movement was prized above less dynamic movement. Movement that lacks active effort qualities was felt to be inexpressive, and movement that combines all three factors was considered the most expressive of all. The teaching model of the "full efforts" (also called complete efforts) expresses this ideal in the neat paradigmatic actions flick, dab, press, wring, slash, punch, float, glide. Many people I've met during the years who've taken an Effort-Shape course or workshop somewhere think these eight crystallizations sum up the whole of Laban theory. Similarly, the geometric crystals of Laban's Choreutics (Space Harmony) are idealizations, intriguing to explore and move through in the classroom but seldom encountered in pure form on the stage or street.

In real life, or real dance, one seldom sees action in which weight, space and time are equally and fully engaged. Much more often we see people doing rather mechanical or functional activity, with the expressive crystallizations known as efforts floating below the surface in a nebulous, irresolute state. Clear effort or effort combinations may emerge decisively on occasion, only to recede again into the less definite flow of mundane movement. The mistake, I think, is to assume that nothing is being expressed unless a clear dynamic intent is apparent.

So if strong/light are the poles of the weight continuum, most of the time we see the weight factor as neither strong nor light, but oscillating somewhere around an inertial midpoint, or passive weight. If you admit the existence—perhaps even the predominance—of passive weight in a sequence of movement, you can begin experimenting with its effects just as you can experiment with the active streams of strength and lightness. You

soon discover, acknowledge, and make expressively useful a whole area of quality. Once the mover can experience her or his own dead weight, the weight of various parts of the body, and what it takes to mobilize that weight, she or he may gain access to a more subtle range of movement.

The same can be said about the time and space factors. No-space can be seen as a type of focus, just like directness and indirectness. In fact, I find it almost impossible to get people to understand indirectness without also trying to feel not being focused in space at all, and realizing the difference. And between quick and slow attitudes toward time there's an ongoing inner time, different and variable for each individual, out of which we can discern our own particular pulse.

These not-highly-articulated middle areas of movement are actually very instrumental to the mover. I think one reason Laban-trained dance teachers de-emphasize them is that they don't show up very strikingly in the charged performance of technique. They don't supply obvious performative effects.

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The teaching of dance technique, in which much Laban theory finds its application, concerns individuals, and all Laban's systems seem to work best in reference to the individual dancer, in describing individual action and expression. They work less well in describing interaction or interplay between individuals, and are almost ineffective in defining choreography and the nature of groups operating in choreographic space. Labanotation, his system of recording movement, is written from the viewpoint of the dancer, not the onlooker, and each symbol, each line of a score shows that dancer's action. Consistent with the expressionist philosophy that it paralleled, it describes art from the inside out. Dance emanates from the inner impulse of

the dancer reaching outward to make an effect on the world. Seen by a viewer in these terms, the dance takes on solo characteristics.

I found that thinking about the submerged, nearly inactive factors as carefully as you look at the deliberate, self-impelled active efforts can reveal much more about the individual's way of stabilizing and adjusting to the changing outer circumstances of life, and to the presence of other people. Acknowledging these recessive aspects of weight, space and time allowed me to identify a lot of neglected detail.

Weight shift, for instance, can be described in terms of body parts and in terms of active efforts if they're present. But a simple exercise in watching pedestrians go by on the street will quickly show that every walker is distinctive. One man tilts over each step from the top of his legs, another sways slightly from the shoulders, a woman pulls forward with her right shoulder, a man has a slight lag in his left leg, a woman holds in the torso and swings her arms, a man digs in heels first, then rolls up through the back before taking the next step. Each one of these constitutes a unique personal rhythm, neither pathology nor paradigm, but each pattern is partly characterized by the use of weight in a nondynamic mode. On stage, what distinguishes a great character dancer from a stereotyper is the replication of such carefully observed detail from real life.

When we don't limit ourselves to either a direct or indirect use of space, we can consider focus as a system in itself. The mover, we see, is engaged in a process of attention-paying that changes all the time. In dancers I've identified five or six very perceptible ways of focusing that affect the performance.

- inner focus, where the eyes are open and the dancer is aware of where she is and what's around her but is concentrating on herself

- functional focus (which might correspond most closely to directness), where the attention is on a particular task to be done, like holding and steadying a partner
- interpersonal focus, where the attention is on the exchange with a partner
- presentational focus, where the dancer is showing herself to the audience, and sometimes looking at the audience, but not actually seeing the audience
- visionary focus, where the performer is seeing an imaginary space

Neither the audience nor the dancer appears to take any special notice of this constellation of movement effects in the course of experiencing the dance itself. The performer's focus behavior constantly directs the audience's attention to parts of the body or the space, emphasizes and de-emphasizes aspects of the movement; yet, astonishingly, I've never heard of a choreographer or director who taught focusing patterns and effects in an organized or detailed way. Dancers just do it, by instinct.

Focusing modes could be examined more specifically in reference to particular dancers' styles, to consistency of use within a choreographic style, and to the ways in which focus can change the audience's experience of the dance. Inner focus, for instance, is very common and I think often inadvertent on the dancer's part. Not only do we see it when dancers go out of space completely, we often see them focused on a close-in envelope of space around their own bodies. They may not even actually look at their arms or legs, but their attention clearly extends a foot or so outside their skin, and contracts or expands with the flow of action. It might, then, be more appropriate to think of this whole mode as kinespheric focus. When the dance calls for contact with another dancer, that contact may be perceived as very intimate even though there's no eye contact, because the dancer actually incorporates her partner into her kinesphere. Other evident forms of eye

behavior that aren't specially noted by movement observers but that affect performance include targeting, scanning, probing, flitting from point to point, and faking.

When the time factor is expanded to include pulse or no-time, detailed descriptions of rhythm, synchrony, impulse, inertia become possible. Perhaps, sticking to the strict Laban theory formulations, one could get to some of these matters by discussing them in terms of interrelated efforts (inertia as the immobilizing or cessation of weight/time factors perhaps), but I always feel unsatisfied with these formulae. In part, I think, criticism is a process of identifying the smallest large clusters of things. If you anatomize too much, on the body level, the dynamic or metrical level, or any other way, you lose sight of the whole event. The fact is, criticism that relies on a narrow, structural breakdown, using any set of criteria, will be unsatisfying to the reader and inadequate as an account of a performance. I think of my accumulated Laban theory and other movement analysis/observation skills as resources on which I draw constantly, selectively and almost without being aware of them. I revere Irmgard Bartenieff at least as much because she was a fantastic observer and teacher as for the theoretical knowledge she gave me.

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Choreography is a larger whole than the sum of several individual dancers' effort profiles. Much of it escapes even the more comprehensive, Laban-based categories of Choreometrics, where the information stays mainly on the body level, with a few rather rudimentary descriptions of dance structure, like whether the floor patterns are circular or linear and if men and women dance *en face* or in a row. The Choreometric parameters for dance form seem to be based on Western aesthetics. That is, they stress

design, shape and the articulated use of the body. They give little or no attention to rhythm, interaction, continuity, change and the signals for change. These are not matters of great significance in Western choreography, or if they are, they are "seen" as musical events, because it's the music that defines the dance. Critics sometimes talk about the movement of *Le Sacre du Printemps* in relation to the music, but that is a closed and artificial system. Has anyone ever talked about the ritual qualities of *Le Sacre* in relation to real ritual dance?

So much of the world's dance is not oriented consistently around individual expression and achievement—or is unconcerned with this aspect entirely—that we need not just broader categories for looking at it but different categories. In 1985, when Martha Davis, Claire Porter and I worked out the curriculum for a six-week intensive course in movement analysis at New York University's Performance Studies department, we decided to blast open our Labanese preconceptions and see what things might rise to the surface as major categories. The first concept we came up with was lexicon.

Since all dance is different, all viewing must attempt to start with an open field. We don't work from a checklist of effort qualities or body parts—or steps in a vocabulary of movement, or anything else. We look at what's "there"—meaning, what claims our attention. Legs might claim our attention but not arms. Quickness but not strength. Jumping but not standing still. Groups but not individuals. A prop or a set piece. If a group of observers lists these things in the course of watching the dance—I usually have students do it in the first five to ten minutes of the dance—without passing judgment on them or trying to sort them out, we come up with a bunch of more or less miscellaneous items we can call the lexicon of that dance. We

can check everyone's list against everyone else's to make sure we haven't left anything out and that we've listed things at the most condensed but comprehensible level. Without burrowing into minutiae or smothering in the obvious, we try to list what's used prominently and most often.

Paul Taylor's *Esplanade* is a perfect dance to illustrate the concept of lexicon, because it actually works lexicographically. It starts out with a few basic movement elements, gradually combines and varies and extends them, and in the process conveys a wide range of expressive possibilities. Yet it has no plot or characters. Nor does it need to refer us to anything besides what is contained in its own lexicon. It starts with walking, a file of dancers, very little else. Later the walking becomes running becomes a chase becomes a virtuosically orchestrated series of baseball slides. *Esplanade* seems to be a dance about how these mundane actions can become dance actions.

The more one observes different cultures, the more extended becomes one's range of lexical possibilities. Any good observer realizes that the ways the human body can move and organize movement are infinite. Things we've never seen won't always be consciously observed. We're bound to notice the bent-back fingers and hyper-extended elbows of a Cambodian dancer, but we might need many viewings of Javanese court dance before isolating the dancers' gaze as being a major lexicon item. There's nothing we can do about our inexperience except live longer and pay more attention.

Since we aren't going to teach anyone the dance, the lexicon doesn't have to be complete or definitive. Its use is mainly to enumerate the things that have stuck out, the things we need to pay more attention to in re-viewing the dance. It embraces concrete elements and strategies, observed phenomena. A lexicon is like a list of ingredients out of which the dance is

cooked. As critics we may want to discover how the ingredients have been assembled, or what combinations of ingredients give the dance its particular flavor. In looking at non-Euro-American dance, a lexicon can point us directly to the building blocks of an unfamiliar idiom, helping us to overcome the temptation to find coherence in what is immediately comfortable or recognizable. I should point out that most criticism doesn't get to a deep level of analysis, simply because of the time and space constraints under which it is practiced. But even the most superficial daily newspaper accounts could describe and differentiate styles more informatively if they homed in on the basics of those styles.

The lexicon is also a key to the choreographic process. What elements does the choreographer (or the tradition) select to begin with? What gets added or dropped? How do the elements get changed and combined during the course of the dance? We want to know what the dance is about, where it's going, where its effects come from. In other words, if the lexicon is the dance's vocabulary, we next want to know what its grammar is and what it's saying. But without converting the dance into words.

This is not as perverse an assertion as it sounds. Dances are turned into verbal or symbolic rhetoric by writers all the time. The better you get at understanding what's going on in a dance, the easier it is to describe the dance's meaning without describing the dance. For instance, in an article relating Martha Graham to the abstract expressionist painters, Stephen Polcari says that *Dark Meadow* contains "references to archaic memory, natural, primitive consciousness, primal, prehensile humanity, the cosmic cycles of the seasons, and the regeneration of the species through love," but he does not in any way translate this into dance imagery or say where he got these notions from. Lexicon is not a semiotic device. It doesn't substitute a

verbal construct for a movement construct. It refers to movement in the language of movement and allows us to see how the movement is manipulated, before it has undergone a literary, intellectual or cultural translation into symbol, metaphor, or narrative.

Ideally, critical writing synthesizes the physical reality of the dance with its poetic or cultural resonance. The last step of the analytical process is interpretation, although in reality we often do it first. We get a gut feeling or a "message", or a series of images is struck into our minds by what is happening on stage. If I'm going to write about the dance, I try to put my instinctive responses alongside the lexical and structural processes of the dance, asking myself constantly where these images and impressions came from. Aesthetic or interpretive conclusions are the hardest thing for a critic to arrive at if she means to stay faithful to the dance. We all sail off into our fantasies while watching dances, but critics, I think, are obligated to find ways to match up their own feelings and impressions with what the choreographer put on the stage. We aren't trying to retrieve the choreographer's intentions or replicate the choreographic experience, but to fathom how the dance produced whatever it did in us.

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A dance's lexicon and the effects it implements—pattern, sequence, and structure—define the apparatus of choreography. But performance is more than a set of elements or rules. An aborigine bird dance doesn't look like an Eskimo bird dance. Even when folk or ritual dances have been arranged for the stage, we can still see stylistic differences among cultures. I'm perfectly aware that from an ethnographic point of view we don't have enough information to explain a foreign culture from its dances. We may not even be able to explain the dances solely from movement information

gathered in this way. What I'm arguing for is more critical courage, more attention to what is going on in the dances, and less squeamishness in saying what we've seen and how it works. American audiences have been fed the Feathers and Tomtoms hype by critics for years, and I think it's time to go beyond gasping over exotica when we report on foreign performances. There are aspects of dance that could be looked at in much greater depth, aspects that are taken for granted or only glanced at without much curiosity when we comment on Western dance. Every one of the following criteria and refining questions has been derived from looking at and listening to specific dances from a wide variety of cultures.

The beat. In possibly all cultures, except those overcome by the Western classical model, the beat is an essential organizing factor. To look at the beat in depth, rather than stop as we so often do at the observation that it's fast or slow, syncopated or regular, is to connect with a vital trope. All the effort factors and many others are contained in the concept of the beat in a dance. It's astonishing how hard it is to get Western-trained dancers to sense, integrate and work with a beat. They've learned something that is based on counting in metrical units, and matching up movements of their bodies with sounds that have been similarly or not so similarly charted. If you're looking at African or Javanese or Peruvian dance, the way into its source of energy is not to count but to internalize its fundamental pulse, or beat.

I use the word beat nontechnically, to mean the basic regular pulse of the dance and/or the music. In most but not all forms, the pulse organizes itself into a regular or irregular subdivision called a phrase, that is usually announced by some kind of emphasis, or downbeat. (I sometimes call this the beat too.) The strongest beat sometimes comes at the end of a phrase

rather than the beginning. There can be secondary accents too, and all kinds of in-between embellishment and reiteration. All of this is what I mean by the beat. How the beat is delineated can tell us much about how the dance operates in very concise terms. We can't interpret this, or any other piece of information, by itself, but it does begin to tell us how the group is keeping together.

What is the nature of the beat? Is it fast or slow, strong or weak, or any of the infinite subtle gradations between those sets of poles? For instance, if it's a weak beat, is it faint, or hesitant, or disappearing? How much does the nature of the beat depend on the quality of the musical instruments or dance instruments (the dancers) who state it? The deep resonance of the Javanese gong produces an entirely different kind of beat from the nasal, quavery exhalations of the Korean p'iri.

How is the beat stated? By the dancers? By the musicians or singers or someone or something else? Do they state it all together or is it antiphonal; that is, is the ongoing pulse shared by one group of performers and another in alternation? With what move or gesture do they state the beat? Are there lapses (syncopes) in which the sense of the beat continues but the beat itself is not seen or heard?

How is the beat reinforced? By the whole ensemble or a sub-unit of the ensemble? Is it simply doubled, or is there an upbeat leading into it or an afterbeat reverberating after it or an almost equally strong echo? What movements produce this reinforcement? Or does the movement contradict, withdraw from, or override the beat? Is the beat greatly embellished? What kind of embellishment? Musical structure, so much more thoroughly investigated and described in almost all cultures, is very helpful in devising a

terminology for all of this. I think of ideas like syncopation, melisma, coloratura. What does the embellishment do to the quality of the beat?

What is the performers' attitude toward the beat? Accepting or antagonistic or reluctant? Casual or rigorous? Do they internalize it, deliberately stress it, disregard it? How does the beat release the dance: does it constrict it, provoke counterrhythms, inspire improvisation, promote continuity or ongoingness and long-lasting energy, extend the sense of time?

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Once I focus on the beat, I find the possibilities for describing the energy of the dance almost endless, and the differences between cultural styles much easier to distinguish. If the beat is the most fundamental statement of the dance, its internal organization can be looked at through its orchestration.

Orchestration means the way the parts of the dance and the performers are related to each other, the layout of the movements in space and time, the integration of sound and action. Whatever level of the dance we're considering, we can ask whether the orchestration is consistent and consolidated, all the parts working together toward the same effect. If not, is it contrapuntal, antiphonal, contrasting? Are the parts interlocking, as in Balinese music, where two different rhythms are played on similar instruments to make a single composite rhythm? Is the orchestration loose, diffuse or undefined? Is the relationship of the ensemble to the beat fixed or variable or indifferent or something else? How do we perceive this?

Rhythm could be called the orchestration of the beat. We can look at the rhythm itself, and describe the nature or the shape of it. Does the same rhythm prevail throughout the dance and is it repeated exactly or transferred from one set of performers to another without changing its essential

character? Are there, rather, many different rhythms in the dance, either successively or concurrently stated? Is the rhythm built on a regular pulse or on some other impulse like speech? Do the dancers have different rhythms from the musicians? Are they complementary or independent? What is the overall quality of the prevailing rhythm?

When we talk about orchestration we're also talking about the divisions within the ensemble: soloists/groups/subgroups. Who plays what roles and are the roles consistent or changing? Are they specialized or interchangeable? Do men do different things from women? What distinguishes the soloists, their special skills, their responsibility for leadership, their representation of iconographic figures in the ritual?

How the group is orchestrated can be very significant. Here we consider all the matters of design, floor pattern, counterpoint, entrances and exits that are so basic to Western choreography. A great deal is revealed as well about the social character of the culture in the way it presents a group of performers. Are men and women consistently segregated or do they do identical movements? Does the group move in unison and in close physical contact? Do they move in unison without any contact? How important is the design they make in space? When cooperation between individuals or groups is required to create some pattern, how is that cooperation effected?

When we think about social interaction, we are bordering on questions of representation. Do individuals or groups in the dance represent characters in some narrative? How are the characters portrayed—by their physical appearance, costuming, actions, stance, demeanor, position on the stage? Are they individuals or archetypes? What are the conventions or abstractions by which they imply ordinary behavior? For instance, in Javanese wayang wong, when a character is killed or wounded in a battle, he falls straight

down into a sitting position, then later moves off the stage in a squat; no curtain falls to preserve an illusion of death.

Many critics would like to be given a handy glossary of these conventions for each new world dance form they encounter, but if we look carefully, conventions usually reveal themselves in the course of the dance. Not only can we decipher the meaning of gestures (hands over heart equals Love in Western ballet), but the codes of behavior to which the society is committed. Are people severely classified by social position, class, caste, occupation, sex? Is touching permitted? Is it polite to stick your elbows out? May a cat look at a king, or a king at anyone?

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Most of the elements mentioned above contribute to the structure of the dance. So do the items traditionally studied in any composition class: theme, development, variation, beginnings and endings, and so forth.

Some other questions that can be asked about any structure include: how is the structure or sequence of the dance understood and communicated? That is, has it been learned by rote and repeated exactly at every performance, or, at the other extreme, is it entirely improvised and intuitive? If it isn't rehearsed, is the structure completely freeform or indeterminate, or does it have to pass through a specified number of phases or accomplish certain tasks? Does someone teach or direct the performers in what comes next? Is it a group expression like a movement choir, or does the group maintain a set pattern while individuals improvise or re-create their own variations?

Another way to get at structural elements is to stand back and consider the dance as a sort of game, and then ask oneself what are the rules of the game? At once the larger issues emerge. If there's a rule that only certain

individuals can do certain things, hierarchical priorities will be operating. If dancers do solos in turn, do they all get a turn, and how is the turn-taking organized? Are there things that always happen—a part of the space avoided, a restriction on the movement range, a gesture that has to occur? These are all clues to meaning, important aspects of the style. Once we discover a rule, we can determine the importance of breaking the rule. Is this seen as a violation, a signal for chaos, an opening up of the structure into a new phase?

I find it very useful to look at a dance structure as made up of units or phases. These can be like the movements in a Balanchine ballet, built on the movements of a musical piece; or the phases in a Matachinas Indian dance, where changes in a repetitive movement pattern are also cued by changes in the musical accompaniment. Phases can be built more organically, as in Trisha Brown's task dances of the 70s, where the idea was to do a movement problem—leaning against a partner until both people fell; when the task was complete, the dance went on to another phase. Phases can also be arbitrarily set. The character and sequence of what occurs within and between these phases—whether the same kind of activity is repeated, the activity changes a lot, the activity gradually evolves—makes up a sort of text of the dance.

Perhaps equally significant are the markers by which these changes are announced, or how does the piece go from one phase to the next. The change can occur seemingly without cues at all, evolving or switching abruptly through some internal agreement among the performers. I think this is how the timing in much of Merce Cunningham's dance is accomplished. But change is more often signalled in a more overt way. Who gives these signals? Are the signals subtle or obvious? Are the markers simply

indicators or do they have status in themselves as transitions? What is the nature of the transitional movements?

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Whenever we look at art, or any human behavior, the thing we most urgently want to know is its expressive content. Listing formal properties or engaging in some purported "pure description" is an uninteresting and ultimately falsifying occupation, I think. Why we do movement analysis, collect all this data, is so we can discover how things in the dance are connected in space and time, how the texts (movement, narrative, music) overlap and interweave. Dance skills and analytical systems are technical languages; they need to be precise and relatively stable. But literature uses words in flexible, non-absolute ways. The critic of dance mediates between these two linguistic possibilities, always aiming to capture that singular interchange of affect and cognition that draws us into the dance itself, and that sets one dance apart from all the other dances that are like it but not the same.

In studying the psychic development of infants, Daniel Stern differentiates between the "categorical affects"—the big emotions happiness, fear, anger and so forth, which since Darwin have been observed in human behavior and facial expression—and "vitality affects," much more subtle and less static responses that accompany all behavior. Stern names as vitality affects such signals as explosiveness, lethargy, and "rush," which could be related to the Laban effort qualities. Anger, fear and happiness may be universally experienced emotions, but Stern thinks the subjective experience of these emotions may differ from one culture to another.✓ Though the observer cannot tell from the action alone what categorical affect it signals, the vitality affect in itself is highly expressive. Stern thinks communication



between parents and infants makes use of this vitality affect system, in much the same way that dancers communicate to an audience. "Dance reveals to the viewer-listener multiple vitality affects and their variations, without resorting to plot or categorical affect signals from which the vitality affects can be derived."<sup>x</sup>

On the broader level of cultural analysis, Ward Keeler, in his penetrating study *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*, maintains that performance can be seen as "a form of interaction and so a form or manifestation of social life."<sup>x</sup> The meaning of the shadow play (wayang kulit) is found only to a limited extent in its text or scenario, which is the point of departure for hours of improvised dialogue and action. Keeler sees wayang as a political and cultural medium, because "to participate in the event of a shadow play means to repeat patterns of interaction common to other domains of life."<sup>x</sup> He insists on consideration of the performance itself, within the context of its audience, because "Only when we treat the performance as an event, as an experience of great evocative power rather than as some elaborate heuristic device, do we escape the intellectualist prejudices and expectations we bring to the study of texts, or for that matter, to many studies of ritual seen as cognitively instructive or transformative experiences."<sup>x</sup>

At last a few scientists and anthropologists are recognizing what we in the movement field have always known, that nonverbal, nonrecoverable actions and affects are highly charged with meaning. My goal as a critic is not to fix meaning but to point the reader toward what seems meaningful. "Meaning," whether cloaked as academic holy grail or journalistic pay dirt, may be elusive, it may be masked beneath more impressive but empty display, it may be culturally inscribed, and it certainly presents literary

challenges. But this situation, this pursuit, is in a way the writer's element, if not the scholar's. I want to explore what people do, but not necessarily to name it or settle it for all time. I urge the reader not to take this essay as instructions or dicta, but to view it and test it as a theoretical possibility. For me, it is only a beginning, and I hope it will provoke the reader to further thinking.

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↻ *The Laban Movement Analysis Compendium*, ed. Martha Eddy. New York: Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies, 1990.

↻ Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*. London: Macdonald and Evans, 1960. Laban's explanation of the fighting/indulging dichotomy as the basis for all human movement occurs on p. 23-24

✓ Polcari, Stephen, "Martha Graham and Abstract Expressionism." *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, Winter 1990, Vol. 4 No. 1. p. 12.

✓ Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books, 1985. p. 55.

× *Ibid.* p. 56.

\* Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*,. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. p. 262-3.

× *Ibid.* p. 263.

\*× *Ibid.*, p. 267.