

Critical & Reflective Studies
BP1CR
22-02-2010

An aesthetic dance experience – Visual shapes or emotional reflection?

By Tuva Hildebrand Petersson

Dance & Aesthetics

Academic tutor: James Else

Word count: 2198

Introduction

The expression aesthetic and 'dance aesthetics' are frequently mentioned in the dance practice. It is used value movements, structure training and goals, but its actual content in relation to dance as an art-form is today unknown to many dance students.

Aesthetics of dance is often related to superficiality. Aesthetic experiences tend to be contrasted with creatively emotional ones. Is it possible for these to be equivalent?

This text will mention what creates art, dance and aesthetics. What makes us able to perceive it and what affect it has upon the spectator. Is it even possible to argue that dance aesthetics is always connected to an emotionally developing experience?

To express and communicate through signs; Signals & symbols

Many creatures communicate through signs. The structure of the mind of Homo sapiens differs, according to the philosopher Susanne Langer (1980, cited in Abbs, 1989, chap. 2) from that of other animals by dividing our acts into two categories, instead of one; signals and symbols. Signals are related to behaviour. They are followed by determined actions, given reactions and serve specific purposes. This interaction with the environment is found among animals such as humans. It is adaptive and when fulfilled, the signal and its value will be forgotten. The car stops when the light switches to red and the bell initiates for the dog that there is food.

'Signals are mindless, we might say, whereas symbols are mindful' (Abbs, 1989, p 34)

Symbols are related to conception and create reflection rather than behaviour. Humans imagine things not present, situations not given yet, while animals' main goal is to complete their started acts. Peter Abbs states that:

'The power to create symbols creates a psychic space within the natural space, a psychic time within natural time ... possibility of meaning is established' (1989, p. 35)

Langer (ibid) separates symbols further into discursive and non-discursive symbols. A discursive symbol reminds of signals, it has a definite psychic meaning and can be transferred into other symbols but retain its intention. The interpretation is objective; it has one context, which is found in for instance science, maths and theory. Non-discursive symbols, however, explain art, dance and religion. The non-discursive symbol creates a subjective reflection which can impossibly be transferred into other symbols. The number five can be shown as roman numerals or as five stones, but the reflection of Clarks piece *Come, been and gone* (30-10-2009), or Hijikatas butoh performance *Kinjiki* (1959, BBC, 1990) cannot be caused by a new creation.

How to perceive symbols?

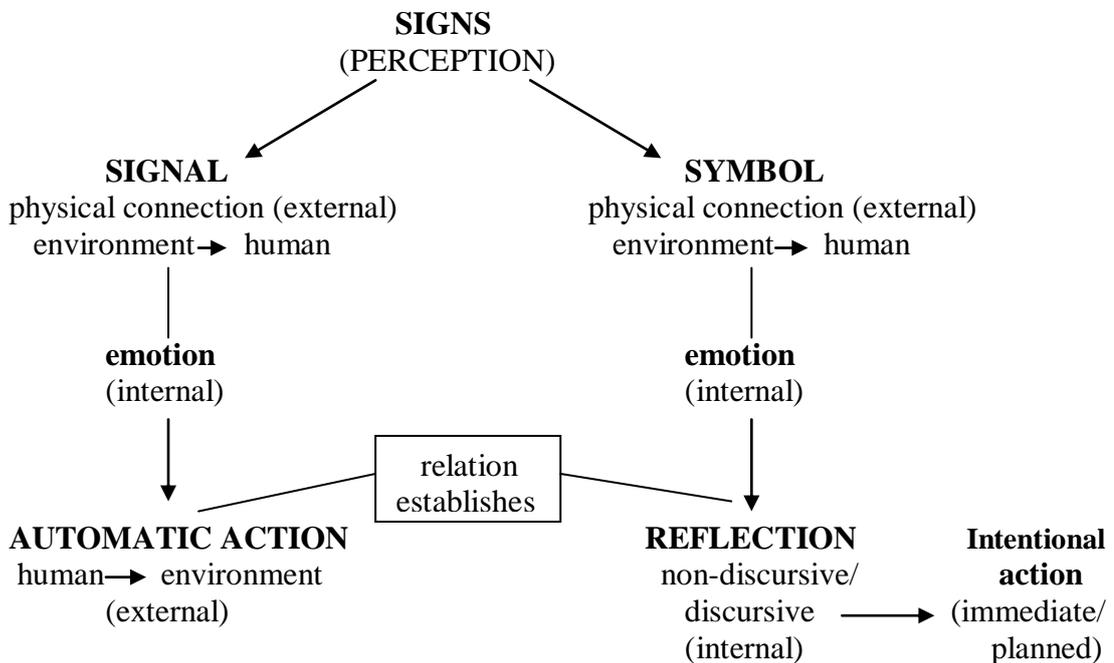
Whether the ability to read symbols and interpret aesthetics is inherent or if this ability is formed by culture, tradition and social structure, is a controversial question.

The philosopher Locke (1947, p. 26-36, 41-43) suggests that the human mind is created by sensation through objects; experience gives knowledge. Kant (1970) claims it is an inherent gift to read symbols; a newborn is not a blank paper without anything predetermined. It has a sense of creativity, of solving problems, and feeding its needs. An example by Abbs (1989, p. 6) is the infant who takes a transitional object ‘as a primary symbolic need of her nature’ to satisfy the need of warmth from her mother.

‘We invariably, symbolically, and perceptually conclude the often inconclusive data as it streams past us’ (Abbs, 1989, p. 8)

A hypothesis is that humans have the inherent physical ability to sense and feel. They are born with generally equal physical condition, and physical needs of reacting and adjusting to the surrounding. Therefore it can be argued that irrespective of culture and tradition there are signs that trigger automatic reactions but occasionally those which are varied and formed by culture and area. Like blank papers humans use the senses to perceive, and the reaction is emotion, they then act on the intuition that follows and relationships to the symbols establishes. The relation forms the later

psychological response to the signs, which gets stored in the unconscious. The response will differ between different minds depending on the related situation.



The ability to perceive signs is inherent but the ability to understand them establishes afterwards. It is then possible to claim that the thoughts and emotions triggered by a dance performance are formed by tradition and culture.

How strongly connected is aesthetics and creativity with our unconscious?

Peter Abbs (1989, chap. 1) suggests that creativity is a condition of human existence. The infant takes a transitional object and explores how to communicate with the world. In the same way people solve problems that occur in their everyday life; we are constantly creative.

Is the creation of aesthetics and dance then the same process as expressing yourself spontaneously through non-discursive symbols? The fact that humans dream and its process can be used to explain the creation of non-discursive symbols and dance as an art-form. Langer (1972) explains that dreams occur in the unconscious; expressions and objects among others, with an existing content the human mind put

into a totality without any conscious creative decision; into a new symbol with an own context. The illogical mental process of putting experience into symbols in dream-mode Langer suggests is equivalent to the mental process behind creating art in reality-mode.

During the 1960s creativity was closely associated with originality (Abbs, 1989, chap 1), which is unlikely if, as stated above, the mind is structured by perceived symbols. Creativity can instead be explained as the ability of letting the illogical take place in the realistic. Everyone is inherently creative but the level of creativity is determined by the extent to which you let the dream-mode connect with the reality-mode and affect your expression and interpretation.

To relate the theory about dream-mode into Langer's theory about signs, dreaming is creation of non-discursive symbols. It is creation in an artistic context; the person's unconscious is the artist with the idea and need to express herself and the conscious is the spectator who interprets what she has experienced. In reality-mode, the person create as 'her unconscious' but consciously, and the audience become 'the conscious spectator'.

“The mind has to bring categories to experience in order to make sense of it” (Abbs, 1989, p. 6)

Coleridge (1962, cited in Abbs, 1989, chap. 1) means that humans see totalities; they do not see each symbol, detail and meaning by itself. The mind is naturally functioning creatively and connects objects together, sees relations and a totality that has its own content. Gombrich (1979, cited in Abbs, 1989, chap. 1) supports this theory, and says that there are inherent aesthetic tendencies towards order.

Humans see symbols everywhere. They understand by relating to earlier experience. If the mind would each time have seen each spot, form, shape by itself as an own symbol it would constantly have to understand a new meaning. Striving for order makes people relate to symbols stored in their unconscious. The ability to read the symbols within the dance, and unconsciously create a meaning, lies in the need of finding truth.

How to explain aesthetics?

In relation to how humans perceive art and aesthetics, a theory is that dance as an art-form is always aesthetic; the expression is made to be experienced and reflected upon. The process is made because a human need to express something, and expressed through art to be perceived by others. It is non-discursive symbols that create a subjective reflection.

The human are formed by experience and culture. Will this be revealed through all her acts? If the case is so, then everything she does will have a trace of her in it, a symbol of her past, which will be interpreted by the people who see it or use the object she has created. Is it then possible to suggest that everything which is created by a human being is aesthetic? What is the difference between an aesthetic and non-aesthetic expression? How come art is defined as aesthetic, but not a shapeless cup? First of all, a three-dimensional object can never be shapeless, but the label 'shapeless' has to do with the reflection that comes out of the object's 'symbol'. A shapeless cup is not aesthetic because it by itself serves only one purpose; to drink from. If the cup had a pattern created by the structure of a human mind, or a pattern chosen by a certain reason by a human in a certain emotional state, then the cup would be aesthetic. The shapeless cup could be a signal or discursive symbol. However, nature by itself, which is not created by human beings, is often seen as aesthetic. It is a human who put nature into its artistic context, which can be because of the mental state he or she is in at that moment. Nature has then become a metaphor, which is related to her past.

Aesthetics can be the shape, the sound, the texture; the expression of the experience. Aesthetics create a reflection that is developing, which will define the perception as art.

Order instead of emotional development

Betty Redfern (1983) discusses that it is on stage where dance aesthetics establishes. The symbols are also the result of the dancers' profession; they have to satisfy the spectators to serve their living costs. Contemporary dance is affected by the

aesthetics of ballet, as ballet strongly influenced the expectations of dance during the romantic period as it was a fine art. Today dancers are trained with a certain critical appreciation which restricts the meaning of dance aesthetics in England to be about the technique and the ‘admiration of virtuosic performance’ (1983, p. 16) rather than the meaning.

The work of Michael Clark, a well-known contemporary choreographer, with a background with the Royal Ballet, the Rambert Company and Merce Cunningham ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Clark_\(dancer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Clark_(dancer))), *Come, been and gone* (Barbican, 30-10-2009) is conservatively based on Cunningham technique, with a movement structure that does not give much creative freedom. It is performed by highly technical dancers and some people may argue that Clark’s piece is not art with depth; it is a physical and technical impressive aesthetic experience that may not create any personal emotional reflection.

In contradiction the Japanese contemporary dance style butoh, is spreading its influence throughout Europe today. Butoh is an inner dialog and strives to contain the opposite of aesthetics. Hijikata (BBC, 1990) says: “Not thinking – only soul”; butoh is about leaving the ingrained movement pattern, and becoming the unaffected newborn. Which we can see in the work of Hijikata and Ohno (BBC, 1990) result in abstract, intense, frenetic and to an unfamiliar, erotic absurd movements. In Oxford there is the company Café Reason Dance Theatre specialized in butoh (<http://www.cafereason.com/>), and another leading butoh choreographer is Marie-Gabrielle Rotie, situated in London, who has direct connection with the founders Hijikata and Ohno. She founded Butoh UK (<http://www.butohuk.com/>) and has taught at Laban, one of the leading conservatoires in contemporary dance (<http://www.rotieproductions.com/>). Beside there are many independent performers embracing the butoh into their contemporary dance throughout UK today. A general reaction by spectators of butoh might be discomfort and irritation because of lack of understanding; it is aesthetic but on a deeper level.

Concerning both of the contrary dances it is possible to claim that it is not emotional developing. Dance containing non-discursive symbols is impossible to not create subjective reflection. It can be argued that humans constantly feel, even when they

are numb or bored, otherwise it would be impossible to get formed through sensation and reaction, according to theories above. Lack of concentration in a performance is explained as superficiality and lack of depth, as in Clark's work, or as not aesthetically pleasing and too difficult, as in butoh. A reason may be that the aesthetics connects with the unconscious, but the ability to let the dream-mode connect with the reality-mode fails.

The symbols in Clark's case could be made only to achieve perfect technique and satisfy in a ballet-aesthetic way, might 'borrowed' and not deeply creatively put together, but they are still affected by Clark and his dancers. The structure Clark chose to use is formed by the emotional state he is in during the process, which is rooted in his earlier perception. The dancers cannot either leave their heritage and emotions completely. This is factors which separates the perception of dance and the perception of the cup we mentioned earlier.

The need of finding order makes the spectator create symbols and connect to the unconscious, but if it becomes dominant it may create the opposite reaction. In realism the need of understanding and explaining overpowers the truthful reaction by trying to find logic. Humans try to read the symbols as discursive, with a 'right' answer, and deny the emotions concerning their internal development. When not being able to concretize they blame it on lack of quality in the performance. Could it then be argued that the reactions impossible to explain are the most truthful ones? When being 'highly creative' the explanation will occur without a need of consciously understanding, because the person has let the illogical be a part of the realistic.

Aesthetics is created by symbols which humans sense and reflect upon by letting the creativity in the dream-mode connect with reality-mode. Humans see totalities and store relations to the symbols in the unconscious. When creating and perceiving dance the emotions and automatic reflection is a result of the connection with the past and relations that might need to be dealt with. Striving for correctness is an ingrained mental pattern which is seen throughout the society in the search for

acceptation, for success, and the expectations of aesthetics. This strive will lead to denial, but above all to not letting the creativity be practiced fully.

Bibliography

Books

- Abbs, P (1989) **A is for Aesthetic; Essays on Creative and Aesthetic Education**
Sussex, The Falmer Press
- Langer, S (1972) **Mind: An essay on human feeling Volume 2**
John Hopkins University Press
- Redfern, B (1983) **Dance, art and aesthetics**
London, Dance Books
- Kant, I (1970) ‘**Morallov og frihet**’
Norway, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag A/S
- Locke, J (1947) **An essay concerning human understanding**
London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Videography

- BBC (1990) **Butoh – Body on the edge of crisis**
London, British Broadcasting Corporation

Internet resources

Marie-Gabrielle Rotie Productions; **homepage of M-G Rotie, leading current butoh choreographer in UK**

<http://www.rotieproductions.com/>, accessed 26-01-2010

Butoh UK; **Organisation dedicated exclusively to the promotion and development of butoh in UK**

<http://www.butohuk.com/>, accessed 26-01-2010

Café Reason Butoh Dance Theatre; **Experimental dance theatre group specializing in butoh, Oxford**

<http://www.cafereason.com/>

Wikipedia; **Bibliography, Michael Clark**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Clark_\(dancer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Clark_(dancer)), accessed 15-02-2010

Live performance

Clark, M (07-11-09) **Come, been and gone,**
Michael Clark Company
Barbican, London

Further reading

Books

Hospers, J (1969) **Introductory readings in Aesthetics**
New York, The Free Press

Cassirer, E (1970) **Roesseau, Kant, Goethe – two essays**
Princeton University Press

Journals

Challis, C *Dance – The philosophy neglected art,*
Joan Russel Memorial Journal
Vol. 2 pp. 32-41

Internet

Micheal Clark Company

<http://www.michaelclarkcompany.com/>, accessed 15-02-2010