The Language of Dance

Karen Bennett | Universidade de Lisboa

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Dance, like most other art forms, is not intrinsically representational. In fact, the expressive, ritualistic or aesthetic dimensions have often had primacy over the referential over the course of its variegated history, and in much modern and contemporary dance, the representational element is sometimes deliberately suppressed as part of a reaction against the romantic ballet tradition. However, the fact that dance events have so frequently been conceived on the back of literary works in Western culture indicates that some level of semanticization of movement is not only possible but also widely recognised. Indeed, some dances are so closely bound to a preceding literary work that they may be considered as "intersemiotic translations" (Jakobson 1992), i.e. rewritings of a verbal text in a kinetic sign system. This is particularly the case with ballet, as we shall see here.

There have been a number of theories put forward as to how dance represents elements from the outside world. The earliest analyses assumed that it acquired its signifying potential from the way in which human beings physically relate to each other and to their environment in everyday life, thereby positing something inherently 'natural' and universal about the kinesthetic code. More recent commentators, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of culture in determining not only the semiotic significance of particular movements but also the way in which those movements are conventionalised into genres.

The aim of this article is to examine the semiotic code that is the Western dance tradition in order to try to isolate some of the 'signs' that may be mobilised by choreographers and performers for the purpose of intersemiotic translation. The way these operate in practice is exemplified with reference to one work in particular, Rudolf Nureyev's ballet version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Kinesthetic Code

One of the first choreographers to systematically explore the meaning potential of rhythmic movement was Doris Humphries, whose book *The Art of Making Dances* (1959) was for long considered to offer the "definitive statement" (Adshead 1988, 27) on dance composition. In it, Humphries develops a coherent philosophical theory as to the origins and significance of dance:

> Every movement made by a human being, and far back of that, in the animal kingdom too, has a design in space; a relationship to other objects both in time and space; an energy flow, which we will call dynamics; and a rhythm. Movements are made for a complete array of reasons involuntary and voluntary, psychical, emotional or instinctive – which we will lump together and call motivation. Without a motivation, no movement would be made at all. So, with a simple analysis of movement in general, we are provided with a basis of dance, which is movement brought to the point of fine art. The four elements of dance movement are, therefore, design, dynamics, rhythm and motivation. These are the raw materials that make a dance. (1959, 46)

Although the implications of universality have been challenged by more modern theories, this is nevertheless a useful starting point for our discussion of the semiotic resources of dance. Particularly interesting for Inter-Arts scholars is the emphasis upon design in both space and time, which suggests that dance shares an affinity with the visual arts and architecture, on the one hand, and with music and speech on the other. These overlaps offer important resources for all attempts at intersemiotic transfer.

The concept of "design in space" (Humphries 1959, 50-66) is applied to many different aspects of the dance: the positioning of limbs in the individual body; the relationship between several bodies in a group; the use of stage space; patterning of movement, etc. Humphries is concerned primarily with the fundamental lines of force and energy present in certain shapes, whether in static or dynamic formations, and analyses them according to two main categories, Symmetrical vs. Assymmetrical and Oppositional vs. Successional. The meanings attributed to these shapes are, she claims, present in real life. Symmetry suggests stability, balance, serenity of spirit, and thus may be assimilated to the Apollonian impulse in art; assymmetry, on the other hand, stimulates, excites, is Dionysian. Similarly, oppositional structures (such as the right angle), which involve energies moving in two different directions and thus anchor or imprison force, evoke vitality, vigour, and by extension, ideas of conflict; while successional patterns (unobstructed linear or curved shapes) are milder and more harmonious, allowing energy to flow freely. A wide range of meanings can be created by combining these dimensions in different ways. A symmetrical shape combined with a successional pattern is clearly the most soothing, while assymmetry combined with oppositional patterns will disturb and provoke; more contradictory combinations allow internally complex messages to be transmitted.

Nureyev's ballet "Romeo and Juliet" (unlike the earlier Macmillan production against which it defines itself) is clearly dominated by assymmetrical and oppositional structures, which immediately suggests that it is being presented as a tale of conflict rather than as a languid love story. Jagged shapes are created by the positioning of the corps de ballet during the fight scenes, exaggerated by the use of long spears and swords that extend the visible force lines beyond the limits of the individual bodies (this is crystallized into a dramatic tableau at the end of Act I Sc. I). The jerky movements and angular postures of individual dancers (including the lovers themselves in many places) also betray their internal conflicts and tensions. The only scenes that are truly dominated by the flowing graceful movements that we usually associate with classical ballet are presented in parenthesis (such as Romeo's dream at Mantua), which not only has the effect of emphasising the harshness of Nureyev's interpretation, but also makes an interesting comment upon the whole genre of ballet and our expectations of it.

The basic principles of design can also be extended beyond bodily formations to the positioning of figures in the performance area, and indeed a great deal of semiotic power may be achieved by tapping into the force lines inherent in the architectural space. The traditional picture-frame stage has a number of points of strength and weakness that can be mobilised for semiotic effect. Its four corners, as right-angles, are markers of conflict and power; while centre stage, the point where all lines converge, is a ‘magical’ point of symmetry and harmony. Consequently, a figure placed at these spots will be endowed with special presence, highlighted in relation to the surrounding crowd. Similarly figures in the downstage area, being nearer the audience and therefore clearly discernable in all their imperfections, are humanised in relation to those upstage; those are more remote and may thus more easily acquire an enchanted, abstract or symbolic quality. A consequence of this is that personality pitches, and especially comedy, tend to take place downstage (Mercutio and the Nurse, in Nureyev’s production of “Romeo and Juliet,” do their routines right in front of the audience), while more symbolic representations take place at the back (the Duke, who utters his orders from a long way off, thus becomes an abstract figure without much real force).

All this of course also has implications for movement within the performance space. Straight forward movements are powerful, implying direct communication with the audience, while a figure moving up the diagonal “is clothed with a heroic strength” (Humphries 1959, 72). Side-to-side gestures are weaker, suggesting vacillation; and circularity evokes ritual, continuity, endlessness. Once again, these significances are manipulated in Nureyev’s ballet: Romeo’s first solo contains a predominance of side-to-side movements, which helps make him come across as somewhat ineffectual; Tybalt, on the other hand, tends to move forward decisively, often on the diagonal; while the clowning of the Montague boys often takes on a circular pattern. The circularity of the Wheel of Fortune dance, performed by the guests at the Capulet Ball, of course contains a symbolism consecrated in folklore.

Humphries’ notion of dynamics in dance is analogous to the concept of the same name in music. As she explains in the quotation given above, it is related to energy flows, more precisely to the volume of energy expended in a particular movement (hence breadth of gesture) and also the way in which that energy is released. Sharp jerky movements, for example, will indicate the presence of some kind of emotional blockage, while smooth movements suggests relaxation and harmony, and sustained movements controlled tension. These effects may therefore be used to colour dances, to endow them with a texture or intensity that connotes mood in a vague non-specific kind of way. They also may be combined with other signs in more ‘figurative’ dancing (if one might coin such a term) for the purposes of character portrayal or other kinds of direct representation. This point will be taken up again below.

As for rhythm, this is a primarily (though not exclusively) temporal quality, which again links dance to music and spoken language. Humphries once more locates the source of this component in the outside world. Rhythmic patterns in art, she claims, are ultimately derived from four sources: the rhythms of breathing, of other bodily functions (such as the heartbeat), of walking, and of our emotional fluctuations. As walking is the core of movement, a series of other significances derive from it. Humphries (1959, 106) claims that the relativity of tempo in dance is centred around normal walking speed (a pace that is faster is stimulating, while slower is perceived as soothing, lethargic or depressive). This obviously brings associations with youth/age and health/infirmity that can be exploited for representational purposes; and these can in turn be extended into the spatial domain, since the final stoppage of the rhythms of life also implies a yielding to the forces of gravity. Hence, the erect human body will evoke youth, vigour and energy, while age or ill health is implied by a generalised drooping, culminating in the final horizontality of death.

Deriving from rhythm is the question of phrasing, another aspect that dance shares closely with both music and language. Humphries points out (1959, 66) that the modern communicative time-shape in all three media is the length of the comfortable breath; and while dance is not physically tied to the length of breath as the other two are, it is influenced by the emotional shape of the breath phrase. Consequently, the significance of the shape of the phrase (whether the highpoint comes at the beginning, middle or end, for example) and its length will have their analogies in both music and speech, with significance for the transmission of emotional meaning between media.

Patterns of tension and release, emulating the emotional rhythms of life, also give shape to all units of movement from the simplest phrase to the entire work. This may be manifested spatially (through the resolution of assymmetrical or oppositional patterns) and temporally (increases in tempo; jerkiness vs. smoothness of movement). It also has implications for the form of entire choreographies.

As for the question of motivation, Humphries (1959, 110) begins her discussion of this aspect with the claim that, in real life, all movements are motivated by some stimulus, conscious or unconscious. This would suggest that we (the audience) might be predisposed to reading motivation into any human gesture, a psychological trait which, if true, would offer a ready-made interpretative framework for the imposition of narrative structures onto primitive movement. However, for the representationally-inclined choreographer that wishes to pin down meanings more unequivocally, there is a semiotic shortcut available; gestures that have been conventionalised in social life, or by the other performing arts, may be incorporated into dance to depict social behaviour (greetings, farewells, patterns of domination/subservience, etc), functional activities (i.e. rocking a baby, scrubbing a floor), and of course emotional states.

Doris Humphries' philosophy of dance, then, offers an interesting interplay between signs that are undisputedly social in origin and others which she claims derive from human physiology and psychology. Although her theory is now over half a century old, it still offers a useful tool with which to interpret dances created within the modern Western context, as we have seen with reference to Nureyev's "Romeo and Juliet."

Another very influential dance theorist of the second half of the 20th century was Rudolf Laban, who not only laid the ground for much important work in the area of Movement Analysis, but also developed the dance notation system that came to be known as 'Labanotation.' Having received his early training in architecture, Laban claimed that dance derives its essential structure from a “living architecture” that already exists in the world, created by human movements and made up of pathways tracing shapes in space. Hence, we live in an unceasing stream of movement, to the extent that “standstill” is an illusion based on a “snapshot” perception of a mind able to receive only a single phrase in an uninterrupted flux (Laban 1966, viii).

Laban developed a highly detailed categorisation system that enabled the identification, description and notation of most commonly used dance movements. It was centred upon three principle planes: Choreutics, or Shape; Eukinetics, or Effort; and Time (roughly assimilable to Humphries’ Design, Dynamics and Rhythm respectively). These were subdivided into categories, which could be then recombined in diverse ways to account for multiple movements. As regards the semiotic dimension, Laban also postulated that specific combinations of these factors corresponded to psychological states or drives: certain combinations of weight and flow could be associated to dreamlike subconscious states, for example, while combinations of space and time show that a person is engaged in conscious practical thinking. Although his categories are stereotypical, we do see some evidence of their usefulness in practice: the slow-motion floating movements used by Nureyev in the dream scenes of his “Romeo and Juliet” are very similar to those associated with Labov’s “dreamlike subconscious states,” for example.

Both Humphries and Laban concentrated their semiotic theories almost exclusively upon movement in space and time. However, in practice, the kinesthetic code is not the only way of generating meaning in dance. Further dimensions are added in performance by other semiotic systems that interact with the dance itself, emphasising the primary meanings, subverting them or commenting upon them. This is what we will turn to next.

Other Signifying Systems in Performance

Despite the attempts of some modern dance to free movement from any dependence upon other signifying practices, most performances do make use of additional semiotic systems to one extent or another. Ballet is particularly rich in this sense, with its total ‘meaning’ emerging from the interplay of multiple codes.

For example, the dimension of costume (including hairstyle and makeup) has an important role to play in the delineation of character. In bourgeois theatre, this is used in a realistic way to signify the character’s rank and status, self-image and self-presentation while, in more radical productions, it often gains a more symbolic dimension. In highly conventionalised dance forms such as ballet, it also needs to be read against the norms of the genre; indeed, one of the means initially used by modern dance to mark its distance from ballet was the rejection of pointes and glamorous costumes.

All of these dimensions may be present simultaneously, of course. In Nureyev’s “Romeo and Juliet,” the long rich crimson brocades worn by the Capulet women operate both realistically, as markers of historical epoch and social status, and symbolically, evoking passion and blood (the colour), maturity (they contrast with the short gauzy shifts of the young Juliet and her friends) and

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membership of a clan (the Montagues wear green). Once these connotations have been established, the symbol can be used to generate further meanings: hence, when Juliet's parents and cousin press a dress upon her, we understand that they are persuading her to accept initiation into womanhood and also into the clan, with all the conflict and bloodshed that this entails.

The set also plays a very important signifying role in the total performance. It is often used to indicate location, either realistically (as in the complex illusions created by the elaborate backdrops and detailed scenery of the bourgeois theatre tradition) or metonymically (when a single item – a bed, say, or a statue – stands for a particular place); alternatively, it may be employed metaphorically, to suggest mood or comment upon a theme. The use of space (the foregrounding or elevation of important elements; the expansion or restriction of individual space, or the division of the stage into multiple spaces etc) is also significant. The mood of Nureyev's "Romeo and Juliet," for example, is very much marked by the vast emptiness of the Bastille stage, which creates a sense of desolation and causes the figures to effectively shrink in size upon it.

Objects from other signifying systems in general culture may also be used in performance, either realistically or symbolically. In all cases, the semiotic potential derives from the recognisability of the sign and its relationship to a particular context (a certain setting, certain kinds of participants, a history or even text), as well as from the nature of the conventions that govern its usage. New dimensions of meaning may be generated by the unexpected juxtaposition of elements, by the insertion of a sign into an unfamiliar context, or by inverting or altering the expected conventions in some way. Thus, we are startled by the fact that Friar Laurence's cell is decorated not only with flowers, but also with a skull and a Byzantine-style image of the Madonna and Child in which the Madonna is white and the child black (a change which profoundly challenges our preconceptions about the nature of Christ and comments upon the theme of transgression that runs through this ballet as a whole).

Lighting, too, may be employed either realistically (to indicate time of day or certain qualities of interior illumination) or allegorically (to create mood or particular effects). Contrasts may be set up between areas of the stage that are lit and those that are in darkness, thus highlighting particular elements, characters or events, and additional symbolic effects may be created by the use of shadow/silhouette. All of these devices are used to great effect in Nureyev's "Romeo and Juliet."

Complex Signs

The basic signs listed above may also be combined into higher level signs. Of these, the most important clearly have to do with character portrayal and the depiction of ritual events, each of which involves the representation of aspects of the world which are themselves constituted of multiple symbols.

Character portrayal in ballet and other kinds of performance is achieved through the interplay of multiple signs. A character's importance, for example, will be marked in many ways:

by physical elevation or occupation of central stage, spotlighting, imposing costume and makeup, the use of props to mark status or power, etc; while the same channels may be mobilised to indicate personality and dramatic function (as evil, comic, inspirational, etc).

Most of the characterisation will, though, be transmitted through the kinesthetic code, and all the performing arts, including dance, are concerned to some extent with the way in which personality traits are inscribed into the body. Indeed, performers often devote a great deal of time to the development of a repertoire of conventional postures, gestures, etc, that can be mobilised for this purpose. It does not surprise us, therefore, that Tybalt, in different dramatic versions of Romeo and Juliet, is frequently presented as muscularly taut, with overly erect torso and tight jaw, suggesting repressed rage and belligerence; Mercutio is given a looser-limbed, more relaxed bodily style, hinting at a much more laidback, freewheeling attitude to life, and Lord Capulet usually displays masterful energetic movements and a frontal stance to depict his dominating nature.

An art which has long influenced characterisation in ballet is that of mime. Classical mime depends, of course, upon a rigid codification of gesture; it establishes fixed sequences of actions, and amplifies gestures and facial expressions to make them larger than life. As in traditional comedy or pantomime, the characters are caricatures, stock figures that the audience has learned to interpret and respond to by convention. The comic character therefore becomes a sign in itself, embodying specific action functions and setting up a series of expectations in view of the part that it plays in the genre as a whole. This is of course highly relevant for any production of Romeo and Juliet, given the comic matrix that has been identified as underlying the work.

However, with the gradual blurring of the boundaries between the different arts during the course of the 20th century, some of the stereotyped forms of character representation traditionally employed by ballet came under pressure from techniques used in naturalistic acting; in the mid/late 20th century, psychological realism became desirable, and attempts were made to transmit in performance some of the complexities and contradictions of human character and motivation. The big debate at this point was, therefore, how this desired realism should best be achieved: whether the actor/performer should aim for complete identification with the character, by using auto-suggestion techniques in the tradition of Stanislavsky, or if s/he should rather try to develop the technique or ‘art’ of recreating those small myriad signs of personality while retaining a certain distance from the role.

The debate has been complicated further, however, by the post-modern erosion of the notion of the ‘sovereign individual.’ The whole psychological tradition of acting was of course predicated upon the assumption that a person, in real life as well as in fiction, was a unified complex of psychological and social traits. However, much modern psychological theory holds that what was formally understood as ‘personality’ is no more than a fragmented collection of roles that are learned or constructed, to be put on and taken off to suit different social contexts; hence, the boundaries between actor and role, fact and fiction, have now become very blurred.

There are therefore a great many kinesthetic signs involved in character that cannot be reduced to quasi-indexical expressions of some deep-rooted emotion, and this has implications for performance. Is Juliet gentle and affectionate because that is her nature, or because society has taught her that young ladies should be so? Is Tybalt's swagger a spontaneous response to a conflictuous situation, or part of a carefully constructed identity as the 'prince of cats'? Clearly, then, if character is no longer so unified, so inherent, as was once thought, there is room for roles to be questioned and subverted in performance. This is indeed is what we see in Nureyev's "Romeo and Juliet," which uses irony to undermine the sexual and social identity, creating interesting subtexts that comment acerbically upon events in the contemporary world outside the text.

Just as objects from other signifying systems in general culture may be alluded to in performance, so might certain kinds of social ritual, such as the wedding, funeral, bullfight, etc. Indeed, given the strong kinesthetic component of many such rituals, it is not surprising that ballet as a genre frequently makes use of them. However, it is often the non-kinesthetic aspects of costume, objects or setting (eg. the bride's veil, the coffin, chapel or graveyard) that metonymically sets up the framework for our expectations, which are then imaginatively reconstrued by the dancing. While classical ballet traditionally uses such rituals comically as part of a conventional narrative, modern works might attempt to subvert them (Romeo's anguished pas-de-deux with Benvolio in Act III Sc. VI of Nureyev's ballet, for example, is a deliberate distortion of conventionalised courtship rituals). Alternatively, they may be hinted at in order to provide a comment upon the main theme. Hence, the various allusions to the bullfight in Nureyev's "Romeo and Juliet" activate a complex web of meanings from other areas of culture, which ultimately recasts Shakespeare's story in entirely new terms.

The Significance of Form and Genre

Even the more formal dimensions of structure are not without some measure of semiotic significance in dance, as in other arts. Like music, the dance will have some temporal design, a shape that is given to it by patterning devices as it unfolds through time.

The simple notion of the return, for example, (as exemplified in the ABA structure) contains a built-in narrative of sorts, while the cyclical pattern provided by a refrain, and patterns of climax and dénouement may also be mobilised for semiotic purposes. Sequences of steps may of course be repeated, elaborated upon, inverted, alternated with others, etc, just like musical themes; consequently, there is a resource here for the expression of certain kinds of narrative meaning.

All dances have their origins in a cultural context, and thus exist at the hub of a network of social connections that a choreographer may mobilise at will. For this reason, the question of genre is also very important in dance, providing an interpretative grid through which all other signs are read. Hence, labelling a dance event a 'ballet' will create different expectations in the viewer than if the same event were to be labelled 'modern' or 'contemporary' dance. Nureyev's

"Romeo and Juliet" has been strongly influenced by other genres (not only other dance-forms, such as folk, court dances, modern dance and the American musical, but also other kinds of performance, such as mime and circus), and indeed the interaction between those genres is an important source of signification. Nevertheless, the basic idiom is still ballet, and the work has to be understood within the framework of expectations set up by that genre.

Dance, therefore, possesses multiple semiotic resources with which a choreographer may, if s/he wishes, recreate a literary text in kinesthetic form. A few of these pertain exclusively to the domain of rhythmic movement, but most are shared with other (performing) arts, and need to be interpreted in the light of those. Moreover, as anthropologically-based studies have shown, dances are also embedded in particular cultural contexts and form part of a complex web of signification that involves all aspects of social life. As such, they need to be interpreted not as formalised extensions of emotional and physiological processes, as some of the early theorists seemed to suggest, nor as mere 'translations' of some underlying literary or musical work; rather, they are hubs of symbolic activity with inter- and extratextual ramifications stretching in all directions. Only if dance events are understood in these terms will their wealth of signifying potential be fully realised.

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