

Dancing as Making - 2: Seduction

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There is another perspective that we must pursue to understand some aspects of my observation that dancing is, in a certain sense, making without meaning. This perspective may help us understand that dancing in being meaningless is actually stronger than making meaning. Here is where I must introduce Jean Baudrillard's idea of seduction. I introduced seduction before and will return now for fuller development.

I will be discussing dancing as seduction in more detail in several lectures focused on Latin American bolero dancing; here I want to focus primarily on Baudrillard's illumination of aspects of what he understood as seduction by contrasting it with production. This contrast remains consistent with our focus on this odd notion of "dancing as making." Indeed, Baudrillard's motivation for his reflections on seduction is largely as a response to seduction being covered over by the dedication to nature and production that has increasingly characterized our culture from the nineteenth century to the present. Seduction was always, from a religious point of view, "the strategy of the devil, whether in the guise of witchcraft or love."¹ Seduction is "the very artifice of the world. ... maintained in psychoanalysis and in the 'liberation of desire.'"² Baudrillard believes the current world "can no longer be interpreted in terms of structures and diacritical oppositions,"³ rather, he argues, it must now be "interpreted in the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances—that is, the terms of seduction."⁴ For Baudrillard, seduction has to do with artifice, with symbol, with appearances or perhaps more to the point seduction has to do with the qualities and gestural movements that are engaged in artifice and appearance. It is an oscillatory process of play wherein things are not what they appear to be, but then it is in this strategy that they reveal. Seduction involves a reversibility, by which we glimpse that interplay between appearance and its referent. Baudrillard takes this understanding of appearance to an extent beyond the old concern with distinguishing appearance and reality into a world, our present world, where such a determination is no longer possible, if ever it was. Seduction then is the pure play of signs; a strategy of appearances.

Baudrillard's discussion of seduction is relevant to our consideration of dancing as making. Contemporary western societies have increasingly focused on making in the sense of production, making things and making things that make things. Production is power. Dancing is a kind of making, but it resists and denies the most fundamental qualities of makings in the terms of the masculine power of production that characterizes our culture. How can we understand dancing as making in such strange terms?

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7. concerns shared by Merleau-Ponty whose work I will discuss below and Derrida and many others,

⁴ *Ibid.*

Baudrillard contrasts production with seduction. Baudrillard identifies production as a masculine power. Power, however, can exist, can seduce, only if challenged, only if placed in a relationship of reversibility⁵ with that which is not powerful, that which makes no thing, that which means nothing, but is that on which power ultimately depends. Baudrillard identifies seduction as the inverse of production, the inverse of power. It has “no power of its own, only that of annulling the power of production. But it always annuls the later.”⁶ Seduction is “femininity that incarnates reversibility, the possibility of play and symbolic involvement.”⁷ Seduction precedes production and characterizes the primal structurality that gives rise to power, the power to produce, to mean. In this sense, Baudrillard understands that

Seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal. Power partakes of all the illusions of production, and of the real; it wants to be real, and so tends to become its own imaginary, its own superstition (with the help of theories that analyze it, be they to contest it). Seduction, on the other hand, is not of the order of the real—and is never of the order of force, nor relations of force. But precisely for this reason, it enmeshes all power’s *real* actions, as well as the entire reality of production, in this unremitting reversibility and disaccumulation—*without which there would be neither power nor accumulation*.⁸

Might we now, in light of Baudrillard’s fascinating understanding, enrich our understanding of dancing as making in terms of seduction? When dancing is aligned with seduction as Baudrillard presents it, it is not productive, nor does it have fixed meanings. It would not project something onto made objects to meet the desire caused by a lack. Dancing is reversible and circular and mortal and powerless and without meaning. What could be more exemplary of the reversibility that is seduction than dancing where the same object, the body, is maker and thing made, is at once dance and dancer? Yet, dancing as seduction is stronger than production, stronger for not having meaning, for not making anything, for not producing artifact. Dancing is foundational in important ways to production and to meaning in that it makes them possible. Dancing is perhaps the last surviving experience of the idea of reality in a world of hyperreality. Remember that I am considering dancing as that which precedes and underlies and makes possible the making of all dances. This is a complicated idea and I’ll return to it again.

⁵ Below I discuss the importance of an incomplete reversibility. This pertains here as well because seduction always annuls production.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.