

Dancing as Seduction - 2: Baudrillard

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Well, this lecture returns to Jean Baudrillard, the late French philosopher that we introduced a few lectures back. I don't want to bore you with philosophical complexities, yet I believe that Baudrillard's understanding of seduction provides us important insights on how to understand dancing consistent with the approach of these lectures, yet adding dimension and depth. Before I start that discussion however, let's take a look and listen to some bolero music. It won't exactly set the tone that will prepare us for Baudrillard, but it will offer us a bit more sensuous experience with the music associated with the dancing. Let's look at the official video of Luis Miguel's widely known song "No se tu."

Seduction often bears a negative valuation. It is associated with deceptive women. To call a woman a seductress is rarely intended to be a compliment. Jean Baudrillard's essays in *Seduction* (1979) explore the dynamics of seduction offering an alternative (at least a fuller richer) understanding to our received views. While Baudrillard does not include dancing in the purview of his discussion of seduction, I believe that by considering dancing as seduction we may enhance our understanding of dancing in a wide range of its aspects. Furthermore, as we gain a measure of comfort and acceptance with this understanding of dancing, we may find that dancing will help us more fully appreciate Baudrillard's understanding of seduction.

Baudrillard understands that seduction has the capacity to "deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning."¹ Since appearances are just that, are not connected to truth or reality, they are reversible, that is, they always contain their own denial, their own opposition.² Baudrillard understands this reversibility as "the sole force that is equal and superior to all others, since with a simply play of the *strategy of appearances*, it turns them upside down."³ Superior to truth and reality in that it remains at play, seduction remains in motion, cannot be stopped, frozen, by truth by meaning by reality.

This extra-systemic understanding of seduction is apparent in Baudrillard's discussion of how seduction fits in the scheme of time. Seduction's reversibility places it at once in all time and outside of time altogether.

There is neither a time of seduction, nor a time for seduction, but still it has its own indispensable rhythm. Unlike instrumental strategies, which proceed by intermediary stages, seduction operates instantaneously, in a single movement, and is always its own end. . . . It is an

¹Baudrillard, *Seduction*, translated by Brian Singer (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990 [1979]), p. 8.

² Perhaps most notable, given its parallel to our earlier discussion of Merleau-Ponty's "flesh ontology," is that Baudrillard identifies seduction with "reversibility." Develop this either here or in the text. Need to decide if I should include an extensive analysis of M-P here.

³Baudrillard, *Seduction*. P. 8. The sense of the "elemental" as Merleau-Ponty expressed for flesh is felt in this statement of Baudrillard's.

endless refrain. There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced.⁴

It takes little effort to see that dancing has this same seductive quality. Dancing is movement for its own end, that is, movement. Its rhythm is its own end. Dancing, as movement, can have no passive mode. Nor does dancing in some instrumental sense create something outside of itself. Baudrillard continues,

Because seduction never stops at the truth of signs, but operates by deception and secrecy, it inaugurates a mode of circulation that is itself secretive and ritualistic, a sort of immediate initiation that plays by its own rules.

Seduction is immediately reversible, and its reversibility is constituted by the challenge it implies and the secret in which it is absorbed.⁵

Quite in contrast to the phrase “movement never lies,” made so famous by Martha Graham, dancing differs perhaps from quotidian movement in exactly this respect. It plays by its own rules which are founded in secrecy and deception. It could hardly aspire to being an art form without artifice. While we may hold with Graham’s dictum, it applies to the appearance of dancing; dancing in its artifice gets at truth, but only through the circulation of signs.

Seduction turns what appears into its opposite. It is the play of absence and presence, of visible and invisible.⁶ In its deconstructive capacities, putting the *not* to every *is*, it is also the root source of power, of creativity, of meaning, while itself holding no power and no meaning.

Baudrillard describes seduction as a kind of “flickering” or an oscillation of presence and absence.

The prismatic effect of seduction provides another space of refraction. Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystalizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence.⁷

A significant motivator for me to want to think and to write about dancing, a reluctant tearing myself away from dancing and teaching dancing, has been an eagerness to try to comprehend and articulate my fascination with dancing (both doing it and observing others doing it, and even thinking about both), a fascination I believe I share with many. I have wanted to understand what there is about dancing that I find so seductive. I don’t believe that this understanding is often considered or has for me yet to be adequately articulated. Baudrillard’s *Seduction*, my reading of it anyway, when related to dancing

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 81. For other discussions of the reversibility of seduction see p. 17, 20, 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ REF here to M-P’s book by same title.

⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. ??.

suggests some profoundly shocking and deeply revelatory characteristics, shocking in being unexpected from the perspective of our received views of dancing.⁸ Suppose that my (our?) fascination with dancing is because dancing is seduction. If this is so, then dancing is comprised of “the pure play of appearances” and rather than meaning as we expect of it, dancing “fail[s] all systems of power and meaning” and “operates by deception and secrecy.” Do we dare allow ourselves to travel this challenging road, one that threatens our most unquestioned understandings of dancing?

In one of his most clarifying discussions of seduction Baudrillard opposes seduction to production. He explains what he means,

[Production’s] original meaning, in fact, was not to fabricate, but to render visible or make appear. . . . To produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and of seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept.⁹

As our society is one that worships production, the deep cost, in Baudrillard’s view, is dramatized by him in identifying production with pornography, that need to lay all bare, to see it all, to expose every secret, to articulate every meaning, to reveal every truth. Ours, he writes, is “a pornographic culture *par excellence*, one that pursues the workings of the real at all times and in all places. [It is] a one-dimensional culture that exalts everything in the ‘concreteness of production’ or of pleasure—unlimited mechanical labour or copulation. What is obscene about this world is that nothing is left to appearances, or to chance [that is, to seduction].”¹⁰ Further, he writes:

No seduction here [that is, in production], nor in pornography, given the abrupt production of sexual acts, and the ferocity of pleasure in its immediacy. There is nothing seductive about bodies traversed by a gaze literally sucked in by a vacuum of transparency; nor can there be even a hint of seduction within the universe of production, where a principle of transparency governs the forces belonging to the world of visible, calculable phenomena—objects, machines, sexual acts, or the gross national product.¹¹

Certainly as we begin to appreciate Baudrillard’s understanding of seduction over against production, we may begin to see the promise, the unexpected wisdom, of rethinking, reseeing, dancing as seduction. Dancing, quite in contrast with pornography and the characteristics Baudrillard articulates as distinctive of pornography, seems to hide, to obscure—at least to compound possibilities. It is a play of appearances, sometimes accompanied by story and text and clear referent, but even the danced elements tend to ambiguate rather than clarify these links to non-dancing reality. Dancing leaves much, perhaps everything, to be said; its showing is also a hiding. What is revealed, shown, produced, is

⁸ I have endeavored to enumerate and discuss some of these in *Dancing: Stepping to the Rhythms of Life* (2007).

⁹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, pp.34-35.

¹⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 34.

¹¹ *Seduction*, pp. 34-35.

ephemeral; leaving but a trace on the emotion, on the memory.

But there is yet more profundity to Baudrillard's understanding of seduction. Seduction is powerless, yet, remarkably the source of power itself. As Baudrillard writes:

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 . . . 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*.¹²

In considering dancing as seduction, what happens to our received folk understanding that dance is expression, that dancing is a language, that dance is “so meaningful”? Can we begin to realize that these widely-held views, seemingly unthinkable to challenge, might merit a good bit of reconsideration—indeed, possibly even rejection? Might we begin to catch a glimmer of the possibility that our world, our culture, so bent on production, has seduced us into seeing and understanding dancing, no matter how contrary to our experience of it, largely in terms of production? Certainly much of dancing has taken on the trappings of “production”: dancers are members of companies that create productions whose worth and success is measured often in terms of money, a product sold. Of course our production-obsessed culture places great pressure on us to appreciate dancing in terms that tend to deny it as seduction?

Certainly one of my motivating concerns is to understand the fascination many experience while dancing and observing dancing. Why do we always stop and watch dancing, almost any dancing, with rapt attention? What keeps us social dancing all night long even if we don't even know that many steps or moves? Why do so many dancers commit themselves to a life of physical exhaustion with so little hope of making a living as a professional dancer? Seductive is synonymous with alluring, beguiling, bewitching, captivating, enticing, provoking, attracting, fascinating, desirable, tempting, titillating, tantalizing, inviting. To grasp dancing as seductive goes a long way in allowing us to understand its

¹²*Seduction*, p. 46. Ital in original. Merleau-Ponty identified reversibility as the essential feature of his “flesh ontology.” The structurality of flesh and seduction are in many ways the same. Reversibility, that möbiatic relationship he illustrated by one hand touching/being touched by the other, is, in his analysis, elemental; it is what makes symbolism, language, art, perception, thought, human life itself, possible. It is reversibility, flesh, that is elemental. Flesh is the source of the meaning and power of these real things. Baudrillard articulates his understanding of seduction as “reversibility” in much the same terms as did Merleau-Ponty of flesh. Thus, for our consideration, Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology aligns with Baudrillard's seduction. Considering the two together expands our understanding of both and, of course, of dancing. I think particularly important are Baudrillard's discussions of seduction in opposition to production and the gender associations of this pairing. I will develop this below. Further, since we found dancing to offer insights into “flesh ontology,” we might expect that our consideration of dancing as seduction will enhance our comprehension of this seduction-flesh complex.

allure. We can describe this fascination in terms of the seductive reversibility: dancing is provocative in its seeming to be full of meaning, yet actually absorbing and obscuring meaning rather than giving it full expression. Dance may be understood as absorbing meaning in that it gracefully receives most interpretations or analyses offered to it. Dancing bewitches by seeming to be making work,¹³ yet it produces nothing real, nothing but the play of signs, the play of appearances. Dancing beguiles in suggesting that the dancer, by dancing, is achieving something like the fullest realization of self (and, of course, it does so but in ways we hadn't anticipated), yet in dancing the dancer becomes something other.¹⁴ In its Möbiatic oscillation dancing seduces us, fascinates us, reveals through what it hides.¹⁵

Consider the role of the audience, particularly in art and high cultural forms of dancing, from the perspective of dancing as seduction. We are often confounded by this relationship between dancers and audience, between dancing and observing dancing.¹⁶ There is much on this subject to be considered. To see dancing as seduction suggests that the dancer-audience relationship be understood in the terms of the same structurality, that is, by considering the relationship between dancing and audience as Möbiatic, as reversible, as chiasmatic, as playful. The play of signs, the play of appearances, in having no connection with reality opens to limitless connections being made with it. Where audiences are present to dancing, members of the audience are seduced by the promise of meaning in the play of signs. Observers of dancing identify and feel signs, signs that interrelate to one another and often even point beyond themselves seemingly toward some reality. As this play of signs "speaks to" each member of the audience it appears to produce meaning for him or her. Members of the audience may be moved, may find revelation, may be changed and charged. Yet, never in the dancing itself does the play of appearances confirm or deny any of these "readings." While, as Susan Foster¹⁷ and others show, dancing can be "read," and it can be although I think it better to think it is dances rather than dancing that is read, I suggest that in light of understanding dancing as seduction, as seduction being dancing's distinction and it as a source of power, we gain much more appreciation for what distinguishes dancing by looking rather at how (and that) dancing prevents and confounds being read, at least in some final sense of being clear, being finished, being captured, in producing some explicit meaning. Indeed, to read, to capture, to make clear dancing's meaning in this sense is, I believe, to take the dancing from the dance, to end the dancing.¹⁸ Dancing seduces by offering the promise of meaning—how often do we hear the meaningless statement made of a dance "oh it was so meaningful"—yet, it never delivers any explicit statement of meaning. Rather it absorbs most meanings offered it and endlessly seduces observers and dancers to continue observing and dancing and seeking meanings that are never adequate.

Considering dance as seduction there is a circulation, an oscillation, a reciprocation, a reversibility

¹³ Many choreographers refer to their creative processes as "making work."

¹⁴ The notion of self-othering is one I develop (where?)

¹⁵ Discuss the notion of hiding as well as revealing i.e. also in metaphor etc. privacy issues

¹⁶ There is something of this relationship akin to the partnering relationship in social dancing.

¹⁷ Susan Foster, *Reading Dancing*

¹⁸ This is quite similar to Massumi's analysis of how we typically take the movement out of movement when we attempt to analyze it.

between dancers dancing and the audience. It is rather like they are partners in a dance, that is, there is dancing taking place between dancers and audience.¹⁹ This relationship can be experienced as confounding and confusing—partners out of sync, stumbling over one another’s feet—as certainly as it can be an experience of unity and complicity that is familiar to all dancers and members of dance audiences seemingly crystallized in unity. But this too is seduction for the unity is but a play of signs. Baudrillard says that the best way to seduce is to be seduced. An audience is seduced in the rapt attention, fascination, by the play of signs, projecting meaning yet being open to the mystery and deception of the illusion. Dancers too experience this circulation. But it should be suggested that this seduction-by-being-seduced occurs in the complicity, the conspiracy that while all appears drenched with meaning (and it is), while all appears to speak to the deepest nature of reality (and it does), while the power generated by the dancing is palpable; in fact, there is nothing real, it is all a lie, a deception, artifice.²⁰ That this aspect of dancing is known but never spoken is the heart of dancing as seduction. All—dancers and members of the audience—are so thoroughly seduced that there is no thought of exposing the secret. And I have no reluctance to expose it here in this non-dance context, being confident that in the presence of dance and dancing we will happily be seduced to enter the game again.

¹⁹Deal with issue of audience as collectivity.

²⁰Connect with S. Langer’s view of dancing.