

Dancing as Seduction - 3: Aura

Sam Gill

We can certainly understand this circulation of seduction between the partners of Latin American bolero dancing as we have analyzed it in the previous lectures. With every invitation and acceptance to dance goes the tacit agreement to play by the rule that all is artifice not real and that the lie of artifice will not be revealed.

Mirrors, mirror images, are like shadows, like masks. They are other, yet they are self. It is common in the West, though relatively unknown throughout the rest of the world, to use mirrors in dancing especially when learning. Apart from mirrors dancers dancing perceive themselves through body awareness, through the subjective bodily experience, more than objectively as a moving object; through feeling more than seeing. Since sight originates in the body, in the face, there is a highly limited and subjective view of one's own dancing body. One is always looking, if one looks at all, down on the body below the neck and exclusively from the front. Mirrors permit an external view, a horizontally reversed image from the perspective of a separated audience. This reflection empowers the dancer to see and to know the dancing more "objectively" complementing the subjective experience¹ of bodily movement, of one's body image. Mirrors shift the sensory hierarchy—they shift the balance between self and other, feeling and seeing.² It certainly makes sense that it is in the West, where objectivity and vision are highly valued, that mirrors are prominent. Brian Massumi distinguished "mirror vision" from "movement vision" on the basis that in mirror vision what is missing is the movement.³ Certainly it is in the West also that the proscenium stage has evolved distinctly separating audience from performers. While mirrors and separated audiences (and the accompanying implications regarding audience experience and decorum) reflect certain cultural and historical values, these specific features are still illuminated further by seeing dancing as seduction. Mirror, like audience, presents "other" to self, self to "other," a projection from the experience of dance itself. It crystallizes the objective perspective that is necessary to the subjective perspective. These elements may add to the seduction of the dance. For in the mirror image the dancer dancing is, in some sense, being seen from the outside, the dancing becomes object. The dancer sees herself, or imagines that she does so, as others see her, yet what is the mirror image? No thing at all; mere appearance, illusion. The dancer is seen "in the mirror" yet this appearance is but an illusion. Mirrors, like members of an audience, engage the circulation of presence and absence, subjective and objective, internal and external, personal and public—a circulation that seduces.⁴

¹ I am fascinated with exactly how this subjective experience works. I think it has much to do with proprioception; the kinesthetic sense that allows us to move in the dark, to move without seeing ourselves move, to have balance, and so on. Some understand proprioception as a sixth sense and certainly we need to think much more about proprioception in dancing.

² Potential relevance of M-P on continuity between sight and feeling???

³ Massumi, pp. 48-50.

⁴ I am reminded of an amazing seductive scene in Carlos Saura's film *Savillanas* where flamenco dancer ??? dances before a triple mirror—we see her seduced by herself. [Hefner-Hayes has details on this]

Often in my teaching I have noticed that many dancers simply cannot take their eyes off the image of themselves in mirrors. It seems they range from a curiosity about themselves—"Is that me?"—to an outright love affair—"Wow am I gorgeous!" Mirrors provide an othering that is clearly seductive.

Many have noted what we all intuitively know that dancing resists, even confounds, reproduction in film and other media. I have a whole series of lectures that need to be added to this collection of lectures. While this is self-evident in our experience, it may be difficult to grasp and articulate why it is so, especially when we consider dance only in terms of what it produces. Films of dancing necessarily make something fixed and objective for film can be reproduced. Dancing must become product to be reproduced. To view as product is a common way we approach dancing. If dancing is understood as telling a story, then to recount the story is usually considered an adequate account of its storytelling function. But, clearly this kind of reproduction does not even touch the dancing itself. Baudrillard notes that seduction cannot be reproduced. Indeed, since seduction is contrasted with production, reproduction is clearly out of the question. To reproduce is to produce again, to show again, while dancing as seduction opposes production in the first place and at any order. Thus, to consider dancing as seduction allows us to more clearly understand why dancing cannot be reproduced. Dancing has its distinction, as seduction, in the play of appearances, in the *not* to the *is*, in the illusion, in the misdirection, in the oscillating circulation of presence and absence and of the visible and the invisible, in its occlusion that may appear as revelation, in its reversibility, in its Möbiatic structurality. Production, reproduction, necessarily eliminates the play, stops the play that is the distinction of dancing. Reproduction takes the dancing out of the dancing.

Once we allow the distinction of dancing as seduction, it is much easier to understand not only why dancing cannot be reproduced, but also why its seduction differs interestingly from that of other forms such as music, painting, and particularly photographs, film, and computer generated images. Dancing, while so physically present, in being seductive it is not actual even in the sense of a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music. These forms produce objects in the real world, while dancing only appears to do so, but does not. In a 1939 essay Walter Benjamin addresses the issues of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."⁵ For forms like photography, film, and computer generated images, there is no discernable distinction between "original" and "reproduction." Mechanical reproduction shifts our understanding of art. Whereas in other forms such as painting, Benjamin suggests that the "original" is distinguished from a reproduction in that it has an "aura," the presence of originality. And in these terms there arise all of the issues surrounding the terms authenticity and forgery. We might understand "aura" in terms of its seductivity.

An original painting has aura—that presence of its originality—while mechanically reproduced works of art do not. While works without aura seemingly are not subject to forgery and authenticity, these concerns are present to works with aura. Dancing is interesting in that it logically precedes both of these classes of art. Because in dancing thing made is identical to maker and is inseparable from making, more than dancing having aura, dancing, it seems to me, is aura. It can never be faked or forged because it cannot

⁵Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in ????

be reproduced. Dancing, seduction *par excellence* is the human form of action that defies reproduction and thus the presence of originality is always assured. Simply put, reproductions of dancing are no longer dancing, they are better understood as re-presentations, a type of production. The ideas of a forgery of dancing and inauthentic dancing are, in important senses, unthinkable. All dancing is original and thus all dancing has/is aura. It is the aura that seduces. Rather than dancing having some lack in not being reproducible, its non-reproducibility is testament to its distinction and designates the source of power.

Well, we may gain some understanding of “aura” as well as seduction by experiencing a clip from the 1999 film “Buena Vista Social Club” made by Wim Wenders featuring Ry Cooder’s travels to Cuba to rediscover some amazing Cuban musicians. This clip focuses on Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo singing the sensuous bolero “Silencio.” Ferrer has since died and Portuondo recently toured at age 80.

Dancing and theatre are close kin in respect to bearing “aura” and, indeed, in many cultures in the world dancing and theater are virtually inseparable.⁶ While I believe that there is a continuity between theatre and dancing,⁷ I think that the distinctive mark is that theater foregrounds the importance of word, of speech, of language which invites, encourages, a reduction of theatre to the text/language model so common to Western sensibilities. Theater can be read as text because indeed it is text, script. There is no strict dancing counterpart to script or score. Plays are written and music composed with extensive dependence on script and score. Even formally choreographed dances are not first or concurrently created on paper. They are created on/in/as the body with memory and direct transmission required. This observation again supports the view, which I believe must be seen as increasingly insightful, of dancing as seduction. Dancing is then self-referential, autotelic, contained, not about anything outside itself, not by choice or subject matter but by its nature. The performance is something added to the principle creation of the play–performance (even musical arrangement) is secondary in some senses to music–yet for dancing performance and creation come at once and are not satisfactorily distinguished.⁸ Yet, of course, parallel to dancing, theatre restricted to the scripts is like dancing being restricted to dance music lyrics. I am astonished by the dozens of studies and other considerations of dance-music complexes that unapologetically, even unwittingly, consider neither music nor dance, but only lyrics. Latin American dance music is an excellent example. Dancing, one would think, and especially dancing that has no accompanying text, tends to foil such reductions.

Dance and text are increasingly interconnected in modern and postmodern dance and dance and text

⁶Beth Osnes, *Acting: An International Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002.

⁷It is interesting to me that in the West “musical theatre” though comprised of both dance and theatre is more often paired or aligned in the university departmental structures than is music with either theatre or dance. Theatre in music is opera or musicals and dance while often present isn’t included in the terminological description of these entertainment genres. I would suspect that the reason here is that dancing as seduction oppose the production orientation of these forms.

⁸ One may argue that a choreographer makes a dance and then this may be performed by various dancers or dance companies, yet the original choreographed work does not take a separate form, a text or score, but is rather a dancing itself.

are interconnected in the dance-dramas common throughout the world. Text is recited by the dancer or a narrator or as an element in the musical score (spoken or sung as lyrics) accompanying dancing. There are many combinations, countless ways in which text and dance are interrelated. From the perspective of dancing as seduction we can offer some criteria for understanding these combinations. In the West, where production is valued and seduction is devalued, I propose that spoken text is often added to disambiguate dancing, to make it speak and relate and function and serve. Dancing is justified by using a text to clarify for an audience the meaning of dancing, or better the particular dance. This gain, however, may be won at the price of losing some of the seductive powers of dancing. The words, in their fixing the meaning, in their production of reality, may suppress the seduction of dancing, of that incipient sense that meaning is about to come forth. It is not difficult to understand the motivation to bring clear meaning and value to dancing, the eagerness to have dances correctly read. But this is a masculinization of dancing, an attempt to make dance productive, a conveyer of value, an action of use. Here dancing aspires to use power rather than being the source of power; though, it will always fail. I also think that words are perceived and processed differently than dancing. Because, as we are conditioned to believe, words inherently mean, that is, convey meaning, it is difficult not to understand text primarily in terms of the meanings they produce or seem to convey. Postmodern literary theory has suggested alternatives to this view and the alternatives are, I believe, precisely in line with allowing literary texts to be seen in terms of their seductive potential. This perspective on word is well known in the sung texts of dance-dramas and the lyrics of dance music. Still, even where texts are read to disambiguate dance, I believe that the seductive aspect of dancing eventually dominates because even when great emphasis is placed on this masculine productive functional effort, the redundancy, the movement, the play of signs that are dancing will wear out, exhaust, and finally deny these other intentions.

Words may seduce as well. After all words are signs, appearances, themselves reversible and as such may be presented in a play of seduction. This is certainly the case with poetic language and sung lyrics. Words may reverse their claim on meaning and value and seduce the auditor. So there are ample possibilities for text to complement dancing as seduction. In recent developments of modern dance where texts are present I suspect that a good many of these choreographers use texts in the attempt to say something, to shape society, to express meaning, to convey value, to produce something, something we recognize as valuable. By placing the weight on the text, the word, the intellect, the effort is self-subversive at least in one important sense.