

Dancing as Seduction – 4: Feminine

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In this series of four lectures we are exploring dancing in terms of the idea of seduction that was set forth by Jean Baudrillard in his 1979 book *Seduction*. It is important to note that the last half of the nineteenth century was a powerful period for the development of feminism and many important French feminists were writing furiously during that period. Thus it was more than a little bold that Baudrillard would address feminism and seduction in ways that seemed to reprimand the feminists of the day as being shortsighted if not simply wrong, but he did so on feminist grounds.

Baudrillard identifies seduction as feminine and production as masculine, and does so for strongly feminist reasons.

All masculine power is a power to produce. All that is produced, be it the production of woman as female, falls within the register of masculine power. The only, and irresistible, power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction. In itself it is null [*sic*], seduction has no power of its own, only that of annulling [*sic*] the power of production. But it always annuls the latter.¹

The feminine knows neither equivalence nor value; it is, therefore, not soluble in power. It is not even subversive, it is reversible. Power, on the other hand, is soluble in the reversibility of the feminine.²

Without engaging the feminist discourse of the seventies or its history, if we acknowledge, for whatever reasons, the correlation of seduction (as Baudrillard understands it) with the feminine and production with the masculine, we may identify dancing, understood as seduction, as feminine. This identity of dancing as feminine need not be, indeed it is not, principally about the gender of dancers or stereotyped gender images of dancing. Although, to make this strong gender stereotype identification with dancing is more the result of a culture bent on production, a culture that devalues seduction (again, I'll keep reminding, in the terms Baudrillard understands it). The feminine activities, done by either gender, are those that are seductive: not only dancing, but also poetry, theatre, the novel, art, music, transvestitism, and so on. That is, the feminine activities are those that enter into and love the play of signs. Masculine activities are those that, through production, seek the end of the game, the resolution,

¹Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 15.

²Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 17. Baudrillard took to task the feminist movement at the time, the 1970s, for having what he believed to be a limited understanding and appreciation of seduction. "What does the women's movement oppose to the phallographic structure? Autonomy, difference, a specificity of desire and pleasure, a different relation to the female body, a speech, a writing—but never seduction. They are ashamed of seduction, as implying an artificial presentation of the body, or a life of vassalage and prostitution. They do not understand that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe. The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political and sexual power." (p. 8)

the real, the truth. And, for Baudrillard, it is the feminine that makes the latter even possible.

Dancing, among all feminine forms, produces no enduring thing—no script, no image, no score, nothing to frame—and, I argue, consequently stands as the exemplar of femininity as it does of seduction. I well know that this presentation runs against the grain of Western values, against the conditioning that forms our understanding of the world. Perhaps we can understand anew the correlation of masculine with production and feminine with seduction that has prevailed in the West. These Western valuations correspond with Baudrillard's understanding, though for different reasons I think. The masculine, threatened by the feminine, has devalued seduction. Perhaps the West has learned to devalue seduction, not because, at some level, it misunderstands it, but rather because it has understood all too well, and, like the feminine with which it is identified, has been threatened by it. Seduction is devalued because the feminine is devalued and vice versa.

Wresting ourselves free of these predispositions (that urge us to run screaming through the streets of denial), in valuing (revaluing) seduction and the feminine, we understand dancing and the feminine and seduction anew.

In the West, dancing has strong correlates with the feminine and femininity in the actual gender sense rather than in an ideological sense. As I explored in earlier lectures, boys don't dance. Boys that do dance are considered feminine. Among men who dance professionally there is a much higher incidence of homosexuality than in the non-dancing culture. It certainly makes sense that for a culture that stresses, seemingly at all costs (the economic metaphor is telling here), production in opposition to seduction—Baudrillard remember sees this as obscene—is a culture that makes simple correlates between the gender of the actor and the value of the action. Women are non-productive (i.e., seductive); men are producers. Production is valued; seduction is devalued. Women are devalued; identified with seduction presented only in a negative threat-to-production light. Since dancing is feminine, then it is women who must dance or it is femininity that must characterize those who dance—an unfortunate misunderstanding of so much. Western entertainment and cultural forms of dancing attempt to refute the feminine-seductive character of dancing by entering the world of production: dance groups are *companies*, they do expensive *productions*, they charge admission, they distribute printed programs, and they seek published reviews. But the feminine gender identity is more difficult to shake.

Take for example the popular 2000 film *Billy Elliot*.³ I have yet to see the Broadway show, so my comments are confined to the film. This film appears to criticize the pejorative aspect of the association of dancing with the feminine. When young Billy finds that he prefers ballet to wrestling, he must hide his interest from his father and family. His friend fears he is a “puff.” His father, a coal-miner (a “real” man), is furious when he finds out and forbids Billy to continue dancing. Billy's love of dancing persists.

In this scene Billy is confronted by his coalminer brother and his dance teacher leading to Billy expressing his anguish and clearly his passion, obsession, for dancing. It is a great kid-dance movie

³Universal Studios, 2000.

scene.

A teacher, female of course, takes him on as a secret private student and eventually his father and family get behind him, supporting his successful efforts to gain acceptance in the Royal Academy of Ballet in London. Billy's non-dancing male friend dresses up in his mother's clothing, teaching us that it is really the non-dancer, not Billy, who is the "puff." At the end of the film, the coal miner father and the coal miner older brother go to London to see Billy perform as the principal dancer in *Swan Lake*. The boyhood friend is present, now adult too, of course, at first unrecognized by Billy's father because he is a transvestite and Billy (surely were we to see the program he'd be presented as William Elliot) is the accomplished, very powerfully masculine, muscular, dancer. The father cries.

While the film does not feature but a moment of the *Swan Lake* dance, the musical includes an extended dance. It is a *pas de deux* of the young Billy with himself at an older age. It is to Elton John's song "Electricity." Here Billy others himself at a different time in his life and the connection of the two sets him free.

Though I enjoyed the movie version and believe these gender constructions with dancing need to be more than reexamined, I think *Billy Elliot* does not offer us much on this, seemingly, its principal point. Reconsider, to begin, Billy's boyhood friend, the transvestite, in terms of Baudrillard's wonderful analysis of transvestitism.

What transvestites love is this game of signs, what excites them is *to seduce the signs themselves*. With them everything is makeup, theater, and seduction. They appear obsessed with games of sex, but they are obsessed, first of all, with play itself; and if their lives appear more sexually endowed than our own, it is because they make sex into a total, gestural, sensual, and ritual game, an exalted but ironic invocation.⁴

So, if we accept this understanding of transvestitism and seduction, *Billy Elliot* incorrectly identifies the non-dancing transvestite as the feminine puff, robbing her/him of his/her highly seductive and therefore feminine—in a non-stereotypical, but rather elemental—character. Corresponding with this treatment is its presentation of William Elliot the ballet principal, who, though in make-up, is athletic, physically ripped, and physically powerful—the very image of productive masculinity. As we study the image that ends the film—Billy's powerful muscular body frozen mid-leap high in the air—we can't help but say to ourselves, "Wow! What a *man* that little skinny kid made of himself." And we appreciate all those years of training and work it took Billy to produce these results. Here again, dancing is forced into being productive. Not only does this dance occur as a lavish production by a distinguished ballet company in an elegant theater, with everyone dressed to the nines; the principal male dancer is an amazingly powerful man. What we don't see is that Billy, much like his transvestite friend, is playing with swans, seducing his audience by entering the world of the play of signs. Dancing is finally always feminine.

I suggest that, rather than challenging our gender constructions, as seems to be its intent, the film

⁴Baudrillard, *Seduction*, pp. 12 - 13.

actually re-affirms, deepens, them. And, because it seems expressly to be about challenging our gender associations with dancers, it seduces us into believing that we are indeed meeting that challenge and makes us feel pretty good about ourselves as we do it. Yet, transvestitism is confused with sexual orientation and, by setting it up as the counterpoint to Billy, the film supports the association of transvestitism with the culturally negative image of the “puff” and thereby misses how it is seductive. And it masculinizes Billy by focusing on his productive aspect which requires freezing him in a closing image making him cease to be a dancing. Set up this way, then Billy, and by extension dancing, must be constructed to emphasize that it is productive and masculine thus missing how it too is seductive.

This consideration of this film reminds me of Milan Kundera’s criticism of novels that are written to make a moral point.⁵ His view, certainly affirming the importance of emphasizing the seductive qualities of the novel, is that novels should present a situation that raises, rather than resolves, moral positions. While *Billy Elliot* is an entertaining film, closer analysis on its seeming moral point shows that its message limits its seduction. The seductive effect of the movie is in its misdirection and falsification of its position; but it is limited to our getting the moral, which stops the play as at the end it stops Billy mid dance, makes it into a product, justifying it as accomplishing a moral purpose.

⁵Cite Kundera