



# RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON THE CULTURAL AND VISUAL HISTORY OF DANCE IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND\*

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**ABSTRACT.** We propose to clarify what distinguishes a cultural history from other ways of approaching the study of dance, as well as the specificity of the approach to dance with respect to that to other objects of inquiry. One of cultural history's main characteristics is the attention paid to the forms of perception and the processes of signification of reality that connoted the women and men of the past; in our case, in an attempt to restore the significance that dance must have had for those who took part in it, but also for those who witnessed – or for some reason, did not participate, collaborate or assist to – the dance of others. Dance in images manifests the meanings that shaped the perception of the choreographic act, thus providing information on how to interpret the sacred space, and how a sense of community could be built among people who attended these performances. A cultural and visual history of the dance combines an analysis of the layers of meanings that have been deposited and transmitted via a vocabulary, and via a set of gestural schemata or formae.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural history of dance, Dance iconography, Gesture, Social space, Ritual dance.

**T**he two workshops, in which the articles collected here were first presented, represented a significant starting point, in the sense that a research path

dedicated to our theme and adopting our approach had not so far been undertaken by a specifically dedicated team on an international scale. At the same time, the workshops were a point of arrival, since the possibility of exploring this itinerary has opened up after a certain number of steps. At the inaugural conference of the

\* Project: *Choreutic Heterotopias: Dance and Performance in the Visual and Literary Culture of the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (HECO) (HAR2017-85625-P 2018-2020)

International Society for Cultural History, which was held in Ghent in 2008, a group of researchers based in Paris presented a panel of papers dedicated to the cultural history of dance, and the following year they promoted, , a permanent seminar on the “Histoire culturelle de la danse” at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (<https://ahcdanse.hypotheses.org/>). If we go back further, we are likely to find research projects and achievements resulting more from individuals than from groups; nevertheless, for a quarter of a century, at least a generation, someone has been moving in this direction.

The task of the remarks we propose here is to try to clarify which direction it is, to suggest what characterizes and distinguishes a cultural history from other ways of approaching the study of dance, as well as the specificity of the approach to dance with respect to that to other potential objects of inquiry.

Cultural history is rather elusive in terms of attempts at definition. One of its most characteristic traits, however, appears to be a particular attention to the forms of perception and the processes of signification of reality that connoted the women and men of the past and which, without subtracting heuristic value from a reconstruction of facts, gestures, behaviours and their contexts, focuses above all on the meaning that our predecessors used to give to all this – without taking for granted, as the tradition of studies of the history of mentalities has risked to do, that mental maps and interpretation keys were universally shared, and on the contrary attempting to pay attention even to discards, to conflicts of interpretation and to their feedback on agency.

In a German Kompendium which is one of the most in-depth methodological texts on the subject Ute Daniel, after having listed a series of possible research objects, specifies: «None of these things – says cultural history’s first tenet – is susceptible to be understood, described or explained, unless one considers the meanings, the forms of perception and the production of sense by contemporaries and incorporates them to one’s un-

derstanding, description or explanation» (Daniel 2001: 17). And a little further she reasserts, by developing a principle formulated by Ernst Cassirer, that cultural history «questions the past by asking how people at the time perceived and interpreted themselves, what material, mental and social motivations had, respectively, influenced their forms of perception and production of sense, and the effects such forms produced» (Ibidem: 19).

What does this methodological orientation entail when applied specifically to a social practice such as dance? Again, without excluding the interest in a reconstruction of facts, gestures, behaviours and their contexts, it suggests that particular attention should be paid to the meaning and value that these assumed to the eyes – the ears, the touch, the mind and the heart – of the women and men of the time we choose to study. In our case, it will therefore be a matter of attempting, first of all, to restore the significance that dance must have had for those who took part in it; but also for those who witnessed the dance of others, as well as for those who in some other way contributed to the preparation of instances and occasions in which people danced, or again to the reasons and feelings of those who, for some reason, did not participate, collaborate or assist, and had something to say about the fact that it was done. It is therefore, to a certain extent, a history of cultural attitudes and a reconstruction of the anthropological background that allowed them to flourish. But also of a variety of symbolic values and mental and emotional associations (less direct or less specifically evaluative), which can contribute to restoring in its richness the perceptual framework to which the quoted passages by Ute Daniel allude. The fact that some of the most advanced and dynamic research groups currently working in dance research combine theory and practice in its study, further enhances this resonance of an experience that can be more thoroughly appreciated if due consideration is also given to its postural and gestural embodiment (del Valle et al. 2020).

Dance is a practice that is proverbial for having left little material traces of the forms of its actual development until the invention, at the end of the nineteenth century, of the cinematographic film. However, this does not mean that there are no older sources from which to work, nor can it serve as an excuse to dismiss the possibilities of research<sup>1</sup>. If the material sources – the objects, the identifiable spaces due to their connection with its practice – are inevitably limited if one proceeds back to a distant time, there is certainly no lack of textual and iconographic documentation that certifies the existence of a variety of choreutic habits and provides a variety of ideas and tools to interpret them.

This is not the place to even try to formulate a definition of what dance is or is not<sup>2</sup>. In the rest of this journal issue there will be no shortage of ideas in this direction. For the time being, we will limit ourselves to a pragmatic approach, accepting as a sufficient (but not a necessary) criterion for inclusion the range of practices we now label as dance. In the awareness that past communities of interpretation have undoubtedly used a variety of terms whose synonymy, interchangeability and overlap with our present ones can, by definition, be only partial.

Historical semantics – the study of the names of dance, of the terms that in different cultural contexts have carved out a part of the potential and actual human experience, and have connoted it with a rich but not unlimited wealth, of values and symbolic meanings – represents in itself one of the most evocative aspects of this field of research. This dimension (that of linguistic awareness) should always accompany the study of any other aspect, thus reminding us that the terms with which it has been defined in the past have never stopped contributing to qualify it.

The reconstruction, albeit partial, of the vocabulary of dance in the past, carefully filters its connections with society

and opens up interesting clues for the interpretation of the cultural code that binds dancers and spectators. The terms schema and forma, discussed here, are culturally polysemantic, rich in nuances and indissolubly linked to the sensorial aspect of representation. Therefore, precisely because of their nature, when they are applied to the field of the meanings of dance in the Middle Ages, as was done in the past for Antiquity (Catoni 2005), they succeed in highlighting its main features: the relationship between dance and ritual, between dance and self-representation and between dance, gesture and the dramatization of social space. Therefore, enriching this vocabulary with new research or new contextualization of the terms used in didactic-moral treatises, in liturgical books and in courtly literature, can therefore contribute to the vision of dance in the Middle Ages as a cultural device.

We have defined today's terminology as a sufficient but unnecessary inclusion criterion for reasons that we will quickly try to outline. Sufficient because for body practices and contexts of their implementation that today we consider choreutic, it is interesting to go and search for historic parallels or equivalents even in the knowledge that, admitted and not granted that they existed, it is widely foreseeable that they were conceptualized and evaluated differently and for example, not associated with other practices that we consider forms of dance, perhaps assuming that they are related to one another. It is not necessary because the series of terms with which dance was designated in the past is a rich and multifaceted legacy, which from time to time, included among its meanings realities that we could now struggle to include or associate with it. Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the fact that, in order to study the experience of the past, it is also necessary to take due account of those linguistic and conceptual ties that subsequent vicissitudes have dissolved or been reformulated, and repositioned.

1 In their general introduction to *Ricordanze* (Franco-Nordera 2010), the editors refer to this commonplace of a lack of evidence as a «rhetoric of the ephemeral», and deconstruct it.

2 One of the most thought-provoking examinations of the subject can be found in Sparshott 1995.

That the research perspective, within which the workshops at the origin of this publication is placed, has at its heart the intertwining between dance and ritual, speaks volumes in this regard: the predominantly artistic connotation, the aesthetic appreciation, of talking about dance today contrasts with a more complex universe of contexts and meanings that we are currently engaged in exploring. Recovering them, striving to find them in a rich, colorful and dispersed textual tradition, means searching for traces in less obvious backgrounds of experience and discursive contexts, and trying to put these fragments of discourse in relationship to one another, to grasp even the unspoken, what could have been taken for granted, but which can thus be brought out and used to reorient, if necessary, what is said more explicitly elsewhere.

More tenuous, but still traceable, are the links with the cultural representation of emotions, such as earthly or spiritual joy, amusement, ecstasy or anger, whose gestures in images can on some occasions coincide with those used to signify dance. An extremely eloquent overlap, the latter, which deserves further investigation. A parallel line can also be drawn in the case where the words and images “against” the dance could also incite despair, repugnance and hostility towards the dancers, as in the case of certain images of jesters on capitals, corbels and facades of Romanesque churches.

At this point, it is clear that images, occupy an equidistant position in the current discourse on the cultural history of dance. A fertile and stimulating chapter is opened up by them. Dance in images draws a space in which the movement is indicated by gestures, objects, details that frequently gather a silent combination of visible deeds, represented by and with the idea of manifesting not only the act of dancing itself, but also, maybe more often, the weight of meanings that ended up shaping the perception of the choreographic act as an act of sociability.

It is therefore not then a question of interpreting dance images as testimonies of choreographic performances in differ-

ent periods. Rather it is a way to explore to what extent they are leading characters and vehicles providing information on how to interpret the sacred space, and how a sense of community could be built among people who attend these performances. Representations of dance, in the end, shape an imagery that will persist for centuries in objects, in gestures and in figurative details. In this direction, the genealogy of the visual studies dedicated to dance, gestures and rituals has an already respectable tradition, which, like a tree with deep roots, draws from the studies of Aby Warburg and branches fruitfully towards the performative studies, the visual studies dedicated to music and theatre, as well as towards the identification of the spaces and scenarios needed for the development of dance, rite and religious ceremonies (Buttà-Belgrano 2020).

Images, then, like words, need a careful philological reconstruction of their original context in order to be correctly interpreted. They have to be interwoven with texts, and with all kinds of sources that can help in the discussion and definition of their cultural history, a process that is more than necessary to avoid a drawing of the past that may be disfigured or blurred.

There are two words that have been frequently used in dance research in recent years: memory and trace. They both seem to refer to the idea that a permanence and a survival of past choreographic practices exist. A permanence that resides in the dancing body, in its gestures, in the repeated use of schemata the code of which must be reconstructed or re-read each time we approach a visual document that represents a choreographed movement. In any case, as it has recently been made clear, the stage where the performance takes place shares the spotlight with the dancing body itself. Churches, temples, cemeteries, gardens, palaces, streets and squares of the ancient and medieval cities determine the function of the dance, demand it as much as dance requires a public to perform for.

As Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera point out in *Ricordanze. Memoria in movimento e coreografie della storia*:

si è configurata l'ipotesi che lo spettacolo, una volta conclusosi e allontanatosi nel tempo, viva alla convergenza di memoria e immaginazione, a loro volta filtrate dalla teoria. L'interpretazione dello storico diventa così la prosthesis di una pratica performativa immaginaria, che riporta la teoria alla sua etimologia legata all'atto di vedere e di riflettere. [...] I luoghi della memoria sono costituiti da elementi materiali o simbolici in cui una collettività o una società riconoscono se stessa e la propria storia (Franco-Nordera 2010: XVIII e XXI).

It is precisely in this sense that we emphasize the complementarity between images, words and stage of the dance, which must be studied as an articulated body in order to bring out all the contradictions that this threefold gaze entails.

The figure of the ritual in its choreographic declination ends up playing an active role – determined by the vision – in the perception and engagement of those who watch or contemplate the image or listen to the long-winded descriptions of angelic choirs and heavenly dances in sermons. The represented movement is also complemented by analogy or contrast that of the viewer (Belting et al. 2019). For the same reason, the portrayal of the enchanted carols and damned dances in the medieval exempla acquires an apotropaic role, because it allows the enchantment to be dissolved in the representation. In the suspended time of the ritual, each dance is subjected to the strict norm of a timelessness that dissolves the real place and at the same time creates a sacred or magical topos. The garden and the forest, for example, are intertwined in the chivalric novel as heterotopic places of adventure and pleasure. In the first space, time is characterized by a permanent joy, in the second it is experienced as the result of a long-lasting and very dangerous spell. It is possible to trace a path that highlights the link between the dance of the characters trapped in the Lost Forest in Lancelot du Lac, as a moment in which time is held, and the motif of the bewitched dance that recurs in the medieval exempla that narrates of possessed youths unable to stop their blasphemous gestures. On closer inspection, the motif is repeated within a-temporal space coordinates that insist

on similar schemata and formae and are based on intertextual references between image and written representation. The circularity of the carola in this sense is the form of the sacred choral eternity of the classical heritage, but also of the magical-idolatrous one, closer to the figure of mania understood as loss of will and control over the body.

Research on the terms that have defined the act of dancing in the past and on the images that have shaped its meanings should therefore be conducted, keeping in mind the scenarios of the choreographic performances. Visual narration, textual narration and dance spaces, as semantic areas whose meanings are generated by and for well-defined communities characterized by culture and identity, thus constitute the required coordinates for a cultural approach to the history of dance as an anthropological and social practice.

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