

Dance and Aesthetic Ideals: Dance as Form in Motion Representing, Sharing and Transcending the Realities of Human Existence

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舞踊と美学的理想： 人間存在の現実を表現・共有・超越する動的な型としての舞踊

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舞踊，あるいは我々が舞踊として見るものは宇宙に遍在するが，人間の舞踊を宇宙の他の物質や生物の舞踊と区別するものは，人間の舞踊がどの社会においても，個人として，社会の成員として，また宇宙における存在としての人間が何であるかについての考えを表現していることである。この論文では人間の舞踊が表現するこの考えを，舞踊を動く型として捉えるシステム論の立場から検討する。具体的には，舞踊を個人としての舞踊家のレベル，舞踊家と観衆との触れ合いとしてのレベル，舞踊家と宇宙とのコミュニケーションとしてのレベルという三つのレベルで捉えることで，人間の舞踊が表現の美・共有の美・超越の美という三つの美の概念を目ざすものであることが示される。韓国と日本の舞踊において，これら三つの美の概念がどう表現されるかが，そこで伝統的に使用されてきた特別な美的概念との関連で説明される。

While dance, or what we perceive as dance, is ubiquitous in the universe, what distinguishes dance by humans from other dancing things and creatures is that human dance expresses an ideal about what it means to be human—as an individual, as a societal member, and as a cosmic being. By adopting the definition of dance as “*kata*, or form in motion”, the paper analyzes the nature of human dance by looking at dance as a system defined at the individual level of the performer’s bodily movements, at the societal level of interaction between the performer and the audience, and at the cosmic level of communication between the performer and the universe. Corresponding to these three levels of dance as a system are the three notions of beauty as humanistic ideals, which may be termed the beauty of representation, the beauty of communion, and the beauty of transcendence. That these three notions of beauty



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play important roles in Korean and Japanese dance is shown by referring to the specific terms Korean and Japanese dance performers have developed to express their aesthetic ideals.

1. Introduction

Whether or not there is a word for it, or whether people can explain why they do it, it is widely recognized that dance is a human activity universally practiced by all social groups.¹⁾ As a matter of fact, dance has been a constant in human existence from the earliest day when our ancestors drew dancing figures on the walls of their caves to the present day when our children occupy city streets to demonstrate their hip-hop steps.²⁾

But is it just humans that dance? A moment's reflection reveals that to dance is not limited to humans, for dance, or what we perceive as dance, exists everywhere around us. From subatomic particles to falling leaves, from bumbling insects to fluttering birds, and from circling planets to spiraling galaxies, all these things and creatures seem to be dancing. Indeed, when dance is viewed as "*kata*, or form in motion", dance is everywhere around us in the universe.³⁾

If dance as "*kata*, or form in motion" is not a uniquely human activity, what is it that distinguishes us humans from other dancing things and creatures in the universe? It may be difficult to provide a single, definitive answer to this question, given that we humans perform varieties of dance—from ritualistic dance of shamans to courtly dance for guests from abroad, from theater dance by professional dancers to folk dance by participants at festivals, from social dance in dance studios to impromptu dance on city streets. One thing that seems to be common among the varieties of dance performed by humans is that dance expresses "something", or as one professional dancer puts it, that dance is "the physical expression of something that can't be described in words".⁴⁾ And we would argue that this "something" is an ideal about what it means to be human—as an individual, as a societal member, and as a cosmic being. We thus propose in this discussion to look at dance as an expression of humanistic ideals to represent, share and transcend the realities of human existence in order to derive meaningful connections between dance and the notion of beauty.

2. Dance as *Kata*, or Form in Motion

To view dance as "*kata*, or form in motion" is to view dance as a system. This is so because "*kata*" is a concept associated with a systems view of the world in that it generally denotes "a structured pattern of interaction among the elements of a system".⁵⁾ But in what sense is dance "*kata*, or form in motion"?

As an art form, dance is a performing art in which the artist, or the performer, wearing some costume, displays a variety of bodily movements in a specific setting, usually accompanied by some musical instruments. As such, dance involves interaction of many elements and can, therefore, be treated as a system. However, depending on how we view these many elements interacting with one another, dance can be treated as a system, at least, on three levels: at the individual level

of the performer's bodily movements, at the societal level of interaction between the performer and the audience, and at the cosmic level of communication between the performer and the universe.

At the individual level, dance is a system of personal representation, involving a series of stylized and structured movements by the performer. As most narrowly conceived, it is a system consisting of the performer's body parts: head, arms, hands, torso, legs and feet. But dance is usually performed, with the performer wearing some costume and accompanied by some musical instruments. Thus, even at the level of personal representation by the performer, we would have to take into account the effects of these additional elements on the performance. We say that dance at this level is a system of personal representation because, as an art form, it tries to express a variety of emotions, concepts, and stories that reflect the realities of human existence.

At the societal level, dance is a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience. This is so because every type of dance, whether traditional, modern or contemporary, has its own vocabulary that denotes what each specific movement signifies, whose meaning the ideal audience is expected to understand. In this sense, the stylized and structured movements of the performer in a dance constitute a system of codified symbols of communication between the performer and the audience.⁶⁾ In that it is a system of codified symbols of communication, dance by humans can be likened to dance of honeybees, for dance by honeybees is, as Dawkins explains, a coded language of communication among them to "tell each other the whereabouts of flowers".⁷⁾ Needless to say, what distinguishes dance by humans from dance by honeybees is that humans are trying to communicate with these codified symbols a variety of emotions, concepts, and stories that reflect the realities of human existence to be shared by all participants in the performance, performers as well as spectators.

At the cosmic level, dance can be regarded as a system of communication between the performer and the universe in that dance as "*kata*, or form in motion" is, as already mentioned, a cosmic phenomenon that takes place everywhere in the universe. In the context of human dance, the stylized and structured movements of the performer can be seen as acts of cosmic communication to seek communion with the universe, transcending the realities of human existence. An example that best illustrates this aspect of human dance is the statue of Shiva, who dances the dance of the universe, showing us humans the way to *moksa*, or liberation.

3. Concepts of Beauty

If dance is a system that expresses a variety of emotions, concepts, and stories that reflect the realities of human existence, where does the notion of "beauty" come in? Indeed, what do we mean when we say that a specific performance of dance by a specific performer is a beautiful performance? To formulate a meaningful answer to this question, which we can employ for a comparative study of the aesthetics of dance, let us first review traditional arguments in aesthetics in the history of art and philosophy, using Hofstadter and Kuhns to cull notions of beauty advocated by

representative thinkers.⁸⁾

Reflecting on what constitutes beauty has a long history. As a matter of fact, it is as old as the history of ideas, as generation after generation of thinkers—philosophers, scientists, and theologians—have reflected on this subject. The tradition of reflection on this subject in the history of Western philosophy, like reflection on other subjects, goes back to Plato. As we can surmise from his discussion of ideas as pure forms, beauty, or true beauty, is for Plato something that belongs to the realm of ideas, representing “the divine truth”. Aristotle sees beauty in “order, symmetry and definiteness” which, as we can see, are the features associated with a collection of objects, or a collection of elements of a thing. In this sense, Aristotle’s conception of beauty is a systems conception. A systems conception of beauty is further elaborated by Plotinus, who sees beauty as “a symbol of cosmic harmony, a manifestation of the unity of being”.

The idea that beauty is something that pleases us is found in Aquinas who argues that beauty lies with “visual pleasure”. Kant argues similarly when he says that beauty is to be found in “the object of a universal satisfaction”. While he follows Plato’s idealistic orientation, Hegel, too, associates beauty with human perceptive faculties when he says that beauty is “the sensuous appearance of the Idea of the Absolute”. To a scientist like Darwin,

beauty as sensuousness has value only because it confers evolutionary advantage to a species, for he sees beauty as “the colors and sounds that attract the opposite sex”.

If we find beauty in something that gives us pleasure, then that something must be desirable to us, namely, something of value to us. And that something that is desirable to us must be inherent as the quality of a thing. This line of reasoning leads Santayana to a view that beauty is a quality that exists in our perception: “Beauty ... is a value; it cannot be conceived as an independent existence which affects our senses and which we consequently perceive. It exists in perception, and cannot exist otherwise.”⁹⁾

If beauty is a value that exists in perception, as Santayana argues, then beauty is, as the popular saying goes, in the eye of the beholder. In fact, beauty becomes a subjective notion in the sense that it involves value as well as perception, which vary from individual to individual. If this is the case, in what sense can we talk about beauty as a common experience by a group of people, let alone as a universal phenomenon? The idea that what is beautiful has a certain objectivity that can be appreciated with “good taste” suggests one way of making objective—through education, for example—the basically subjective nature of beauty.¹⁰⁾ We will have more to say on this matter later on. For now, we provide our own definition of beauty, a systemic conception of beauty.



Jazz-dance *Last Ballad* by Akira Matsui

A system, in general, is a collection of objects, or elements, which are in a relationship to one another. It is not a thing, but a collection of things. These things are seen as forming a unit because of a relationship among them.¹¹⁾ Thus, the beauty of a system must be something that captures the totality of that collection of things. With this in mind, we propose the following definition of the beauty of a system: "The beauty of a system is the quality of a system that gives it a sense of balance, coherence and harmony". The subjective nature of the notion of beauty is still with us, for this definition begs the question of "whose" sense it is that decides that a system possesses balance, coherence and harmony, not to mention the central question concerning the meaning of "balance, coherence and harmony".

4. Beauty of Dance as a System

We saw earlier in Section 2 that dance, as a system, can be treated at three levels. Our definition of the beauty of a system given above is intended to be applicable to dance as a system at each of the three levels.

At the individual level of the performer, dance is a system of personal representation, involving stylized and structured movements by the performer. It is a system consisting of the performer's body parts: head, arms, hands, torso, legs and feet. The beauty of dance as a system of personal representation is, then, the quality of performance that gives us the sense of balance, coherence and harmony among the performer's body parts. It is the quality that the performer is able to acquire only after years of training. Hence, we define the beauty of dance as a system of personal representation as: "the state of high accomplishment that the performer exhibits with refined movement".

At the societal level, dance is a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience. Stylized and structured movements of the performer constitute a system of codified symbols of communication between the performer and the audience. Hence, the beauty of dance as a system of social interaction can be defined as: "the state of communion between the performer and the audience in sharing the emotions, concepts, and stories behind the dance".

At the cosmic level, dance is a system of communication between the performer and the universe. The beauty of dance as an act of cosmic communication can therefore be defined as the state of total absorption by the performer, leading to liberation and enlightenment, that is, "the state in which the performer transcends the realities of human existence and becomes one with the universe".

The beauty of dance as a system at three levels discussed above can be summarized as: "the beauty of representation", "the beauty of communion", and "the beauty of transcendence". While it is difficult to generalize, it would be safe to argue that every type of dance has the potential of leading the performer from the beauty of representation to the beauty of communion to the beauty of transcendence with increasing degrees of accomplishment in his/her dance.

5. Beauty as Aesthetic Ideal

Our notion of beauty as it applies to dance as a system, which we discussed above in Section 4, is not exempt from a criticism that it is still a subjective notion, for somebody has to judge when the state of representation—of communion, or of transcendence—is reached that renders a given performance of dance a beautiful performance. What, then, is the mechanism by which the notion of beauty, which is basically a subjective one, gets objectified and becomes the shared notion of many individuals, or of a social group?

As for the beauty of representation, there is a certain level of mastery that the performer is expected to reach before his/her performance is recognized as beautiful. Although what constitutes refined *kata* varies from one kind of dance to another, it is up to the master performer, or the teacher, who judges whether the performer has reached that level of mastery based on a set of criteria established by the school to which the master performer, or the teacher, belongs. In this way, the beauty of representation gets objectified and gains social recognition.

The social dimension of the beauty of dance becomes more pronounced when dance is seen as a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience. In order to reach the state of communion that can be characterized as beautiful, the audience is expected to be actively participating in the performance. This requires, in the first place, that the audience be familiar with a system of codified symbols that the performer expresses with his/her stylized and structured movements. It also requires that both the performer and the audience feel that they are engaged in a form of nonverbal communication to share the emotions, concepts, and stories behind the dance. A shared culture between the performer and the audience certainly helps to facilitate this process of nonverbal communication. Indeed, it is through the shared symbols of cultural values that the beauty of communion is objectified and collectively experienced by many individuals.

Dance as a system of cosmic communication is an act of communication between the performer and the universe. At this level of abstraction, it is indeed immaterial whether there is an audience for his/her performance. It is dance as an individual act of communication by the performer who seeks liberation and enlightenment through his/her dance. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is this individual act of communication between the performer as the individual human being and the universe to which he/she belongs that dance acquires objectivity, or universality, when the performer succeeds in completely overcoming his/her individuality behind his/her dance movements and cultural specificity behind the codified symbols of communication employed.

Dance as an art form expresses humanistic ideals, namely, concepts about what it means to be human—as an individual, as a societal member, and as a cosmic being. Humanistic ideals, needless to say, differ from one social group to another. They also undergo changes over time even within the same social group, with different ages defining different concepts about what it means to be human. Humanistic ideals in the context of arts can be called aesthetic ideals, to the extent that art is an attempt to represent, with pleasing forms, “the idealization of a type of humanity”.¹²⁾

In the case of dance, these aesthetic ideals are expressed as emotions, concepts, and stories which are specific to each type of dance and which the performer is expected to demonstrate with his/her movement.

If aesthetic ideals of dance differ from one social group to another, they also differ from one type of dance to another in a social group. The degree of specificity, or universality, of an aesthetic ideal behind each dance is expected to be widely different between a traditional dance indigenous to any social group and a hybrid dance created by the merging of indigenous and imported dances. The key criterion here is that the degree of universality of a specific dance is determined by the degree to which it overcomes and transcends cultural specificity and space-time specificity. This is the criterion we propose to apply in judging the degree of universality of aesthetic ideals of Korean and Japanese dance.

6. Aesthetic Ideals of Korean and Japanese Dance

Korean dance, reflecting its long tradition, has developed its own aesthetic ideals captured by certain key concepts. Among the most-often cited concepts are *chong-jung-dong*, *mot*, *hung*, *han*, *shinmyong*, and *cheon-in-habil*.¹³⁾

Chong-jung-dong, or “stillness-in-motion”, refers to the ideal of the stylized and structured movements of the body that the performer strives to accomplish and can, therefore, be regarded as the beauty of representation in Korean dance. *Mot* and *hung*, translated as “an inner spiritual quality of charm and grace” and “a feeling of lively animation and enthusiasm”¹⁴⁾, can also be regarded as the kinds of spirit and feeling the performer is expected to express before his/her performance can be called “refined”, or “beautiful”.

In contrast, *han*, or “frustration, bitterness, and unsatisfied desire”, can be regarded as an aesthetic concept that applies to Korean dance as a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience. This concept is most widely cited as representing a typically Korean emotion in the context not only of Korean dance but also of Korean culture in general. An accomplished performance can induce both the performer and the audience into experiencing *han* so that whatever the sense of bitterness or frustration they feel in the conduct of their daily existence is sublimated.

Shinmyong and *cheon-in-habil* can be regarded as aesthetic concepts in Korean dance as a system of cosmic communication between the performer and the universe. The Chinese characters associated with it show that *shinmyong* literally means “divine brightness”. As such, it refers to the state of highest performance in which the performer dances as if divinely inspired. This leads us to *cheon-in-habil*, whose Chinese characters mean “unity of heaven and human”. When this term is



Enjoying sushi as a farewell feast

applied, the performer has achieved liberation from the pain of life, as embodied in the concept of *han*, and has become one with the universe. Thus, *shinmyong* and *cheon-in-habil* can be regarded as representing the highest aesthetic ideals of Korean dance.

Aesthetic concepts most widely cited in the context of Japanese dance are: *jyo-ha-kyu*, *ma*, *hana*, *yugen*, *muga*, and *mu*.¹⁵⁾ *Jyo-ha-kyu*, which literally means “preface-break-quickness”, refers to the sense of timing in the performance as the performer goes through his/her movements. It is not enough to show movements; what is important is the way successive movements are paced. This implies that there should be moments of rest amidst moments of motion. Inserting moments of rest amidst moments of motion is a matter of taking proper interval between motions, which is represented by the concept called *ma*, which, though it literally means “space-between”, means “time-between” as well.



Questions and answers during final session

Hana and *yugen* are the aesthetic concepts originally discussed by Zeami in the context of *noh* dance. *Hana*, which literally translates into “flower”, refers to the highest expression of artistry available at any age. And the concept of *yugen*, which translates into “mystery” or “profoundity”, refers to the highest level of artistic accomplishment, or “a degree of artistry which is of that middle ground where being and non-being meet”.¹⁶⁾ These aesthetic concepts, having found themselves into other types of dance as well, represent the state of accomplishment in Japanese dance that the performer strives to achieve and the audience in attendance is expected to appreciate. In this sense, these aesthetic concepts can also be regarded as referring to the notion of beauty in the context of Japanese dance as a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience.

Muga and *mu* are the aesthetic concepts that reflect the influence of Buddhism in Japanese arts in general and Japanese dance in particular. *Muga* means “selflessness”, suggesting that, in order to reach this state of high accomplishment, the performer is required to let go of the consciousness of his/her self.¹⁷⁾ While a novice tends to be too conscious of what parts of the body are required to move in what manner during the performance, an accomplished dancer goes through a series of movements effortlessly, as if he/she is completely unaware of what his/her body is doing. When the consciousness of self is completely extinguished, the performer reaches the state of *mu*, or “emptiness”. This is the highest level of artistic expression in which the performer reaches enlightenment, liberated from the pain of life.

There are commonalities as well as differences between Korean and Japanese aesthetic ideals. That there are commonalities is not surprising, considering that the two societies have inherited common cultural systems such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. However, the

differences in their historical experiences have given rise to different orientations in Korean and Japanese cultures. Thus, *han*, which plays such an important role in Korean culture, is not as important in Japanese culture, though a similar concept called *urami* exists and is often referred to in certain types of dance-dramas, including *noh*.

To the extent that there are commonalities between the aesthetic ideals in the two societies of Korea and Japan, we may speculate whether these aesthetic ideals go beyond the geographical as well as cultural boundaries and have relevance to other societies as well. Although the terminologies employed may differ from one society to another, three aesthetic principles upon which Korean and Japanese dance is built seem to possess certain degrees of universality.

First, the Korean concept of *chong-jung-dong* and the Japanese concept of *jyo-ha-kyu* both refer to the importance of “timing” in dance, or the importance of mixing moments of stillness, or rest, and those of motion. No dance requires a continuous movement of the performer’s body from the beginning to the end. There are moments at which the performer’s body comes to rest during the performance. Even during these moments of rest, however, the performer is not actually resting but is storing up his/her energy for his/her next move. In fact, the control of energy, or *ki-energy*, required by the performer can be likened to the law of conservation of energy of a mechanical system, in which the system conserves potential energy at rest and kinetic energy in motion.¹⁸⁾

Second, dance in both Korea and Japan has the dimension of being a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience. Whether staged indoors or outdoors, a dance performance provides an opportunity for people to share their emotions, concepts, and stories that reflect the realities of human existence. For example, when the performer tries to demonstrate with his/her body movements the agony of social injustice inflicted on the character he/she portrays, the audience is invited to experience the same emotion, albeit vicariously. This way dance, as a system of social interaction between the performer and the audience, becomes a medium by which that agony is cleansed and sublimated.

Third, *shinmyong* in Korean dance and *muga* in Japanese dance both point to the importance of total absorption in the act of dancing on the part of the performer. Dance by a truly accomplished dancer becomes so effortless that he/she appears to be completely unaware of himself/herself—so much so that the whole performance appears to be divinely inspired. As a Persian poet put it, “whosoever knoweth the power of the dance dwelleth in God”.¹⁹⁾ Or, to quote a modern philosopher, “the dance creates an image of nameless and even bodiless Powers filling a complete, autonomous realm, a ‘world’”.²⁰⁾

Another concept employed to refer to the state of total absorption in Korean and Japanese dance is *sizentai*, or “naturalness”. “Naturalness” can indeed be considered a reflection of the prevailing humanistic ideal in the Orient of being in tune with the way of Heaven, of becoming one with the universe.

7. Conclusion

Looking at the beauty of dance as an expression of humanistic ideals, which we have done in the preceding pages, enables us to go beyond specific societies of Korea and Japan and speculate on the potential role dance can play in the turbulent world of the twenty-first century, characterized by conflicts among social groups and clashes of civilizations. For one thing, dance has the potential to become a medium of pacifying social dissonance and intercultural conflicts as well as a system of social interaction to share common experience as human beings. For another, there is the potential of dance becoming a means of achieving self-realization and transcendence as a system of cosmic communication between the performer and the cosmos, which is a universal aspect of dance in all societies.

These two potentials of dance in the twenty-first century suggest that we are in need of formulating new aesthetic ideals in the world of global interdependence, full of dissonance, conflicts and confrontations among social groups, cultures and civilizations. In view of these two potentials of dance, we would like to propose two such ideals. The first ideal could be expressed by the term “connectedness”, which reflects the importance for us of realizing the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. In the literature of aesthetics, this ideal is nothing but Plotinus’ notion of beauty as “the unity of being”. To this notion of beauty as “the unity of being”, we would like to add another notion: beauty as “the unity of becoming”, which can be represented by the aesthetic ideal of “mindfulness”. Both “connectedness” and “mindfulness” are grounded in the world’s wisdom traditions and, as such, have the potential of being universally recognized as aesthetic ideals in the globally interdependent world of the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1) See, for example, Spencer (1985) for varieties of dances performed by various social groups around the world.
- 2) See, for example, Adshead-Landsdale (1994) and Sachs (1937) for historical survey and analysis of human dance.
- 3) See Sagan (1980) and Zukav (1979) for examples of dance-like behaviors in the natural world.
- 4) “[Dance] has always been the physical expression of something that can’t be described in words.” Min Tanaka, a Japanese *butoh* dancer, as quoted in *Japan Times*, June 14, 2007.
- 5) Koizumi (2000), p.455.
- 6) For a comprehensive discussion of dance as a form of nonverbal communication, see Hanna (1979).
- 7) Dawkins (1996), p.98.
- 8) See Hofstadter and Kuhns (1964) for references to specific sources of traditional arguments of art and beauty advanced by representative thinkers quoted in this section.
- 9) Santayana (1955), p. 29.
- 10) William James (1950), for example, develops this line of argument.
- 11) Bertalanffy, for example, defines a system as “a set of elements standing in interrelations.” See, Bertalanffy (1968), p. 55.
- 12) Read (1968), p. 21.
- 13) See, for example, Van Zile (2001) and Yoo (2007).

- 14) Van Zile (2007), p. 84.
- 15) See, for example, Salz (2007) and Koizumi (2007).
- 16) Koizumi (1986), p.62.
- 17) *Muga*, though originally a Buddhist term, is employed widely to refer to the state of selfless absorption in dance performance in Japan, from *kagura*, sacred dance in Shito, to modern dance. For a discussion of *kagura*, see, for example, Ono (1962).
- 18) See, for example, Prigogine (1980) for a discussion of the law of conservation of energy in classical mechanical systems.
- 19) As quoted by Sachs (1937), p. 57.
- 20) Langer (1953), p. 190.

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