

Lecture: Week Five

- How do we understand the body in Western Cultures? How do others understand the dancing body?

In the chapter we are reading for this unit, Synnott talks about what the body represents. He traces how people have constructed the 'meaning' of the 'body' in Euro-America from ancient time to the contemporary 'now.' For dance, the way we consider what the body is, what it means or represents affects how we understand or value the dances we encounter.

We saw the body being considered a vessel through which God can move in the video, *Dancing: Lord of the Dance*, in week one. This concept of the body underpins the Yoruba religious dances we saw.

If we consider the body like a machine that we can train and build, we can see how ballet and street dance cultures share a sense of developing virtuosity in movement through the well-worked body. In these types of dance there is a '*no pain, no gain*' or "*just do it*" type attitude to the body. When people see the body as machine they feel fine with training it to do things. This often results in a sense of the better trained the body is the better the person inside it.

There are also attitudes to the body where it 'betrays' the person who has it. It can 'give away' what they are really feeling, or not be strong enough to do what the person wants it to do. This attitude leaves the need to control the body. At time periods in cultures when control of the body was valued, dance has often been seen as a threat. Dance can evoke a sense of losing control and that scares people (especially people in authority). On page 26-28, Jonas writes about the Ghost Dance, an example of a dance that was banned

'The Ghost Dance, government authorities acted to contain what they saw as the imminent threat of armed resistance, although Wovoka [the person who dreamed the dance up] has explicitly preached against war' (Jonas, pg 28).

In this week's video we are going to look at how seeing the body as something that must be controlled (controlling your feelings by not showing your emotions) has led to people seeing dance as sexual. In these cases, dance has come to be associated with the opposite of control. This attitude has led to colonialist missionaries banning dances as they 'discovered' new places.

This response to people dancing has damaged it as an art form for many years. Some dances were lost or their development was arrested. Many dances went underground and were performed in secret and passed down through being taught in secret.

In next week's lecture, we will be looking at Hula as an example of dance that has gone through this history of being banned, practiced secretly, and coming back to the people to dance again.

As we study dance in world culture we must be very aware of the impact of judging things from another culture with your own cultural values. Every culture has different understandings of things like gender, power, family, the body, the mind, relationship with environment, relationship with God(s) etc...The dances that come from each culture reflect the values of that culture. In order to understand that dance you need to know something about the culture. Or for us, as a dance scholars, we can appreciate the dance as a way to better understand a culture.

Either way we must be aware of our own cultural values in order to notice the differences that the dances we are watching demonstrate. Of course we do not have to 'understand' a dance we can just appreciate it as something beautiful or interesting. None-the-less being aware of the cultural significance in the dance is important because there may be way of engaging the dance that are insulting to the people dancing and the culture it comes from.

It is therefore important to start to create a list of questions to ask ourselves about a dance as we watch it. This helps us notice the nuances of that particular dance. We will look at this further in future lessons.

Today we are still feeling the effects of the attitudes toward dance of earlier missionaries and discoverers traveling from Europe to other parts of the world. This put a kind of hierarchy into the appreciation of dance. For instance, we still tend to think of dance done in the streets or 'folk' dance as having less status than dance done in theaters. A kind of 'them' and 'us' is perpetuated by this. Judging dance by comparing different dances and giving them a value is not helpful as we look at different dances around the world. That is because what is dance, or beautiful, is different from one culture to the next. This reminds us of Week 1 where we discussed the idea that you cannot define dance. You can only be aware of your own cultural construct for what dance is.

As you complete this weeks lesson, ask yourself if any of the contexts for the body that Synnott describes are ones you have bought into. How do the different approaches to the body manifest in the dances we have looked at in religious practice and in dance sexualized?