THINKING WITH MOVEMENT: IMPROVISING VS. COMPOSING?

In this paper we address some common misconceptions about the acts of improvisation and composition in dance, since we think that they lead to fundamental misunderstandings of the very processes involved in thinking with movement. We want to illustrate that far from representing a dichotomy, improvising and composing are closely related. Whether a dance is considered to be 'improvised' or 'composed' depends on culturally specific distinctions that reflect the values of a given society. Application of culture-bound assumptions to an investigation of 'the dance'[1] or human movement in general can lead to conclusions that are not only inapplicable with reference to the body languages of other peoples, but indicate a lack of comprehension of the movement idioms of one's own society.

Some Common Misconceptions

During a recent lecture-demonstration on 'anthropology and art' conducted by Drid Williams, each of us was asked to perform a short stretch of danced movement without any explanation to accompany it. One of the excerpts was from an idiom of dance from south India, the other a sequence of American modern dance. Following our short performances, Williams then demonstrated how a semasiologist might question us in order to elicit information about the sequences we had performed, their context and structure, as a preliminary step towards gaining anthropological understanding of the idioms of body language to which they belonged. Members of the audience (consisting of students, teachers, choreographers and performers of dance) were also invited to give their impressions of what they had seen; to describe how they might initially classify the sequences, and to ask any questions they might have.

Some interesting points arose.

Many of the audience thought that where the movements in the south Indian excerpt[2] were prescribed by tradition and therefore 'set', the modern dance sequence was surely improvised. Several audience-members remarked that the first was obviously 'rule-bound', where the latter was not.[3] The misconception lay in the fact that the south Indian excerpt was improvised and the modern dance sequence was taken from a composition of Hart's that had been choreographed a year previous to the occasion. The 'teaching experiment' that Williams had set up was instructive: where we had expected a lack of proper understanding of an idiom we knew was unfamiliar to nearly all of those present (the south Indian form), we were surprised at the misapprehension of their own body language and idioms by American dancers and practitioners themselves.

Additional Problems

A second impetus for writing this paper was provided by two articles written by well-known philosophers of dance, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Joseph Margolis, in which they make certain statements about dance improvisation and about 'thinking in (not 'with') movement' that we, both as professional dancers and as anthropologists of human movement, simply cannot accept.

Sheets-Johnstone says, for example, that improvisation is "unrehearsed and spontaneous ... a form which lives and breathes only in the momentary flow of its creation" (1981:400). She argues that "to create a dance improvisation is thus not to create an artistic product, that is, to bring into being a form which might be rendered in future performances by different dancers. It is to create an ongoing present from the world of possibilities at any given moment." In a dance improvisation "the process of creating is not the means of realising a dance, it is the dance itself" (p. 400).

One of the main assumptions that Sheets-Johnstone seems to make is that in an improvisation the only reference to 'rules' are the rules of the improvisation itself, i.e. to do anything that one wishes, or, as she puts it, "to dance the dance as it comes into being at this particular moment at this particular place", with some additional constraints such as decisions to do a 'contact improvisation'[4] or to alternate between group and individually performed movements. Composing, on the other hand, is apparently different because it allows one to edit, to ponder over a movement and to change or even to delete it.

This leads her to the statement:

> Thinking in movement as the process of creating the dance is thus different from thinking in movement as part of the process of choreography (1981:401).

It is somewhat difficult to grasp the distinction Sheets-Johnstone wishes to make until one learns that "thinking in movement is obviously a bodily phenomena" in which spontaneity is the result of a "kinetic declaration of animate existence" -- clearly not a characteristic one can attribute to the process that someone like Balanchine goes through when he choreographs and so produces a dance. Sheets-Johnstone therefore not only sets up a dichotomy between improvising and composing, but suggests that while in the composing process there is a 'product' that somehow comes between the dancer and the dancing, in the former process of improvising, there is no such 'product' in the dancer's mind so that thinking and doing are indistinguishable. Improvising in dance is thus not only a bodily phenomenon, it is 'the dance'.

In a paper published in the same journal, Margolis assumes a similar position. He says that dance movements are generated "in terms of the dynamics of motor activity controlled proprioceptively", and thinks that a written score cannot "exhibit formal properties" without the assistance of actually seeing the movement performed (1981:419). We wonder whether he can read any of the extant written movement scripts and to which of these he refers?[5] Margolis declares that what is notated in a written score emphasises "visual recognition tout court" and so concludes that "the dance may be less accommodating notationally than music or drama because it is more autographic in spite of being a performing art" (p. 424). We were somewhat puzzled by these statements until we realised that these writers managed to confuse aspects of dance that performers and analysts of movement manage to keep distinct.

At the same time, certain other distinctions are made that seem to demonstrate a lack of understanding of how dancers, choreographers and teachers think about dance: many of the above-quoted statements refer to dancing, regarded by both writers as simply a 'motor activity'. No distinction is made between dancing, the dance, a dance and danced

movements (See note 1). Propositions that refer to aspects of dancing are then assumed to hold for 'the dance' and 'danced movements' in general as well. Since a dance score is expected by them to refer only to the 'motor activity', the dance is consequently found to be less accommodating notationally than is music or spoken language.[6]

We believe that these writers do not take into account the fact that dancing also includes the notion of the performance of a dance: it is not simply 'motor activity'. Danced movements are not 'just' bodily phenomena; they are concepts that can be written down without reference to the mechanics of movement. In fact, a dance score represents a notation of these movement concepts separated from any particular performance of them, just as a musical score refers to musical notes, or a written language text represents words, sentences, paragraphs and thoughts that are unconnected with any particular 'performance' of them.

A musical score does not contain any information as to the mechanics of performing a piece of music,[7] nor does a spoken language text (such as this paper) give any clues as to how to use one's vocal chords. A written script of a dance need not capture the individuality of any one performance, although it is possible to write a score of an individual's performance. Rather, a script usually references the formal characteristics of a medium of expression. A musical score exhibits formal properties through its conventions such as key signatures, bars, staff, differently shaded notes and such, all of which are connected with the principles of harmony and the rhythmic structure of western music. As we shall show later, the same is true of a written dance score.

The kinds of structures that underlie a play are connected with the grammar and syntax of a particular language and/or with the principles of blank verse, for example. They do not concern the physical structures of the throat and larynx. Why, then, should one look at a dance score for any more of a guide to moving, or an aid to picturing how a movement should look than is appropriate to other types of script? Could we not look, instead, for formal properties that refer to the structure of a particular dance or idiom of dance? Why must one call the motor aspects of the act of dancing, 'the dance' and pay little attention to dances themselves just because their structures are not directly visible in performance?

A Useful Analogy

Many people are much more naive (and they are often extremely vague) about dance and human movement than they are about spoken language and music. This is reflected in the fact that the very word 'dance' in English is used to refer to many different levels of generality which are often confused in everyday discourse. In order to gain more clarity, it is useful to make a linguistic analogy[8] that compares dancing, a dance, and the written version of a dance to similar aspects of a spoken language. If one thinks about dancing as the use of body language similarly to the ways in which we think about speaking as the use of spoken language, then it is possible to make certain crucial distinctions.

The combined term 'the dance' is a generic term, like the term 'language'. One does not say, 'I speak language', one says, 'I speak Japanese, Dutch, French or English', i.e. a language, yet, we often hear people speak of dancing 'the dance' -- although professional dancers are usually clear as to the style or technique they mean. They are aware that they do not dance 'the dance', but a specific idiom or idioms of dance (Kabuki, Graham, Bharata Natyam, ballet or tap). Just as in a poetry reading we assume that a poet does not recite poems 'in general', but a poem or some poetry in a language, so a dancer dances a dance in a particular idiom of dance.

In a written version of a poem, a conventional script (e.g. the Roman or Cyrillic script) is used to write a poem in a language. In a dance score, too, a conventional script such as Laban's may be used to notate a dance (Swan Lake) in an idiom such as ballet. In order properly to notate, or to a lesser extent to read, that dance, the writer or reader needs to be familiar with the idiom to which it belongs, just as one needs to know the grammar, syntax and phonological rules of a language in order to read or to write a poem, speech or drama in that language. The resident notator of Paul Taylor's company, Jan Moekle, says that as she comes to understand Taylor's choreography, it becomes easier and easier to notate his work. Clearly, the reason for this is that she is learning his body language and is beginning to recognise the structures that underlie his use of the diverse body languages that comprise American modern dance.

Knowing a language or idiom of dance means that one is familiar with the conventions, assumptions and structures that underlie it. This is what is meant by the rules of a language. Thinking in terms of a body language not only allows us to understand the difference between dancing, an idiom of dance, and a dance, it also allows us to differentiate between the anatomical structure of the human body and the structures that underlie a dance or an idiom of dance.

Dancing refers to the performance of a dance; while this might involve the mechanics of moving, a dance consists of movements that are generated by the structures of an idiom of dance. One can compare this to speaking which refers to the vocal articulation of words, phrases and sentences that are generated by the grammatical structure of a language rather than to the mechanics of producing those sounds. No amount of understanding of the anatomy and kinesiology of the body in motion can help one perform a jazz or tap sequence, unless one is familiar with that movement idiom. That is, unless one is acquainted with the rule structure of jazz or tap dancing.

The question can then be raised: just what is the difference between the 'process' of choreography or composition in a body language and the 'process' involved in improvisation? Before we address this question, we will establish what we mean by improvisation.

What is Improvisation?

Some commonly held notions are these: (i) creating 'on the spot', (ii) free-form, or without form, 'winging it', (iii) trying to provide a reasonable substitute for what (it) was supposed to be (as in 'fudging' it), (iv) something that is different each time, and the like. In our

investigations of the notion of improvisation, we also found it useful to compare it to improvisation in other mediums of expression, as well as to try to discover what is meant by 'improvisation' in different cultures, because that which is meant by 'improvisation' to Martha Graham is different from that which is understood as 'improvisation' by a Bharata Natyam dancer from south India. Similarly, what to Jennifer Muller[9] is a process towards an end product might be regarded as the end product itself by a sand dancer or a tap dancer.

Questions also arose as to what is regarded as 'being the same' in two separate performances of the same dance. If a choreographed stretch of movement is performed 'the same way' on two separate nights, how does one account for the different 'message' or 'feeling' that one gets each time? What part is 'the same'? If one had seen Martha Graham's Primitive Mysteries, performed originally in 1931, then seen the first re-construction of the dance, made in 1964, in how far could one consider it the 'same' dance? McDonagh notes that upon re-construction of this work, parts were "choreographed ... in the original spirit of the dance" by Sophie Maslow, and that Martha Graham, while watching a rehearsal, referred to "the one in white as the Sabbath Queen" instead of "the Virgin Mary" (1973:275).

But first, we examine the activity of dancing itself. As we have tried to show, many people regard improvisation not as a rule-based activity, but rather as a 'free-flowing', 'stream-of-consciousness' succession of movements selected in a totally random manner from all possible movements. * [Perhaps this viewpoint is based on the assumption that choreographed dances also consist of nothing more than a random selection of movements.

We believe that this viewpoint equates the dancer with the pre-lingual child producing its first 'nonsense' sounds -- the child articulating sounds that in later years he or she will no longer be able to produce. Although we imagine that in theory it is possible to continue making all the sounds that might emerge during this developmental process of experimentation with the vocal apparatus, we know that in practice, the child discards all sounds but those that achieve the goal of communication with his or her world, i.e. the sounds of the spoken language of his or her society.

Similarly, during the process of dance training, the dancer acquires a vocabulary of movements from instructors who have themselves been influenced by the idioms of dance to which they were exposed. These idioms are marked by a certain exclusivity. That is to say that they make use of some movements, but not others. This selectivity of movement 'vocabulary' is itself a major factor in distinguishing dance idioms and styles of dancing from one another at a purely visual level, if nothing else. The dancer, like the spoken language-user, has made choices along the way that are incorporated into his or her modes of expression, thereby enhancing the probability of producing others. While engaged in the act of dancing (whether improvised or composed) the dancer makes choices not from an unlimited range of movement possibilities, but from those that belong to an acquired movement vocabulary.]

The particular choices that are made are influenced by previously learned, performed, or as yet only imagined arrangements and re-arrangements of this acquired vocabulary.[10] This vocabulary is governed by rules, as is the vocabulary of any spoken language. Even when speaking extemporaneously, a speaker can use his or her language in new ways without fundamentally ignoring or changing its rules, i.e. its grammar. Knowledge of these rules

is a pre-requisite to the quick and facile manipulation of sound and meaning expressed in speeches, lectures or conversation, as well as in papers, novels and other written compositions.

Imagine for a moment a person who tried to utter extemporaneously a stream of English words in a syntactically incorrect order: for example,

Moon cow over the jumped the. Green it made is cheese of.

The result is a very halting attempt that cannot be sustained for very long before giving way to a completely tongue-tied state.

The point is this: it is more difficult to produce a string of ungrammatically ordered words than it is to produce a string of grammatically ordered words. We suggest that the same is true of stretches of movements. It is highly unlikely that a dancer will produce a series of ungrammatical movement sequences, and even when this is attempted, the dancer is aware of the rules that are being broken.

'Grammaticality' with Movement

In order to create a sentence and then call it ungrammatical, it is necessary to know the rule that has been broken. Consider, for example, this ungrammatical English sentence:

'The lion killed the buffalo, wasn't she?'

It is not necessary to know the exact name of the rule given to this transformation by linguists to be aware that one cannot use a form of the verb 'to be' in a 'tag' question that follows a sentence using the verb 'to kill'. Correct usage requires a form of the verb, 'to do'. In order to construct a grammatical sentence, one does not usually go through this thought process, but the rule does exist in our implicit knowledge of English, or else we could not point to the sentence and say, 'That's ungrammatical'.[11]

Equally, to demonstrate an example of the kinds of grammatical rules that govern the Graham idiom of dancing, one could execute the ungrammatical movement phrase shown in Fig. 1.[12]

This sequence (Fig. 1) violates the rule whereby the contraction of the pelvis is meant to take place prior to a contraction of the rest of the torso, the arms or the hands. To a Graham dancer, this stretch of movement looks as funny as the sentence about the lion and the buffalo sounds to an English-speaker. Even if the dancer may not be able to articulate which rule has been broken, he or she finds the sequence unacceptable as a Graham movement. Another way of putting this is that the dancer 'knows' a mistake has been made. Analysis of Graham technique allows one to note many fundamental rules that govern the idiom, some of which are presented in the section below entitled 'rules of the Graham technique'.

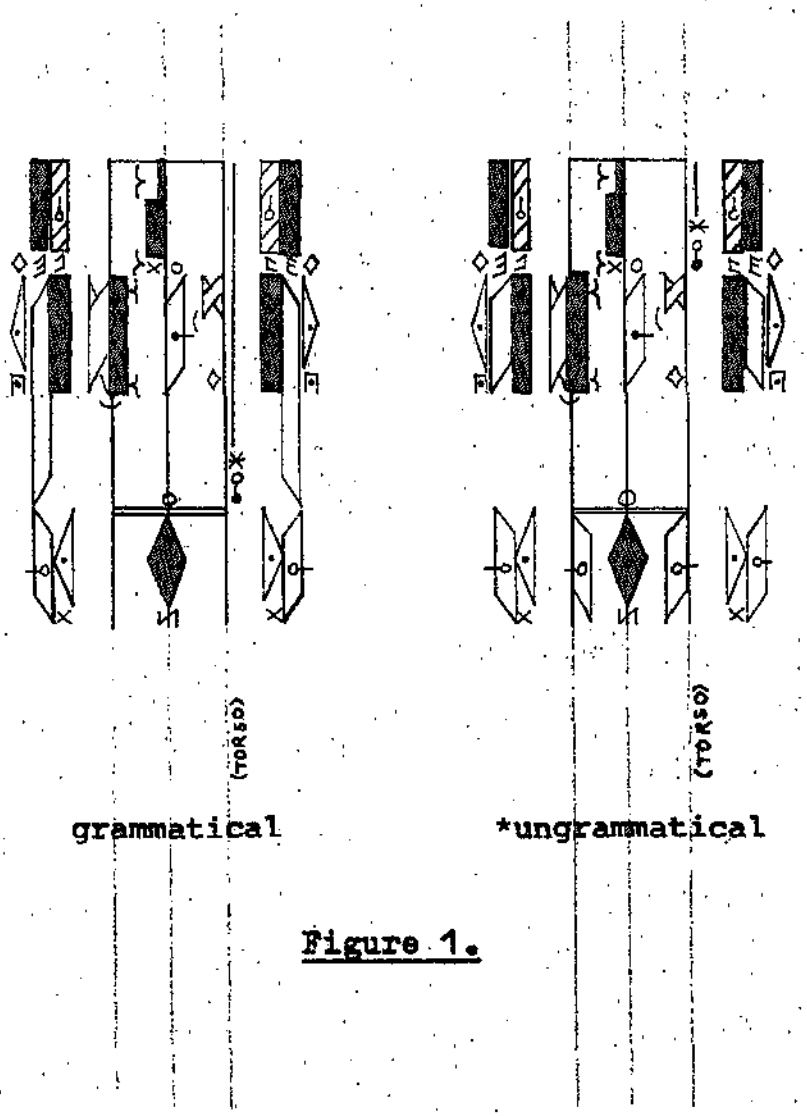


Figure 1.

Improvising, like Choreographing, is a Rule-Based Activity

Although it might be argued that, theoretically, the entire range of possible movements is at the disposal of a person moving at any given moment, the actions chosen usually reflect the individual's exposure to certain specific sets of actions that are a result of training -- formal or informal -- whether as a dancer, acrobat, martial artist or musician.

One clear example of rule-based dancing that is improvised is that of the original tap and sand dancers, whose movements were created in the context of matching and/or complementing jazz music -- itself often characterised by improvisation within the structures of selected key and measured time boundaries. One could say that the jazz musician is theoretically able to choose from all available sounds and combinations thereof that are possible within the well-tempered clavier scale and the

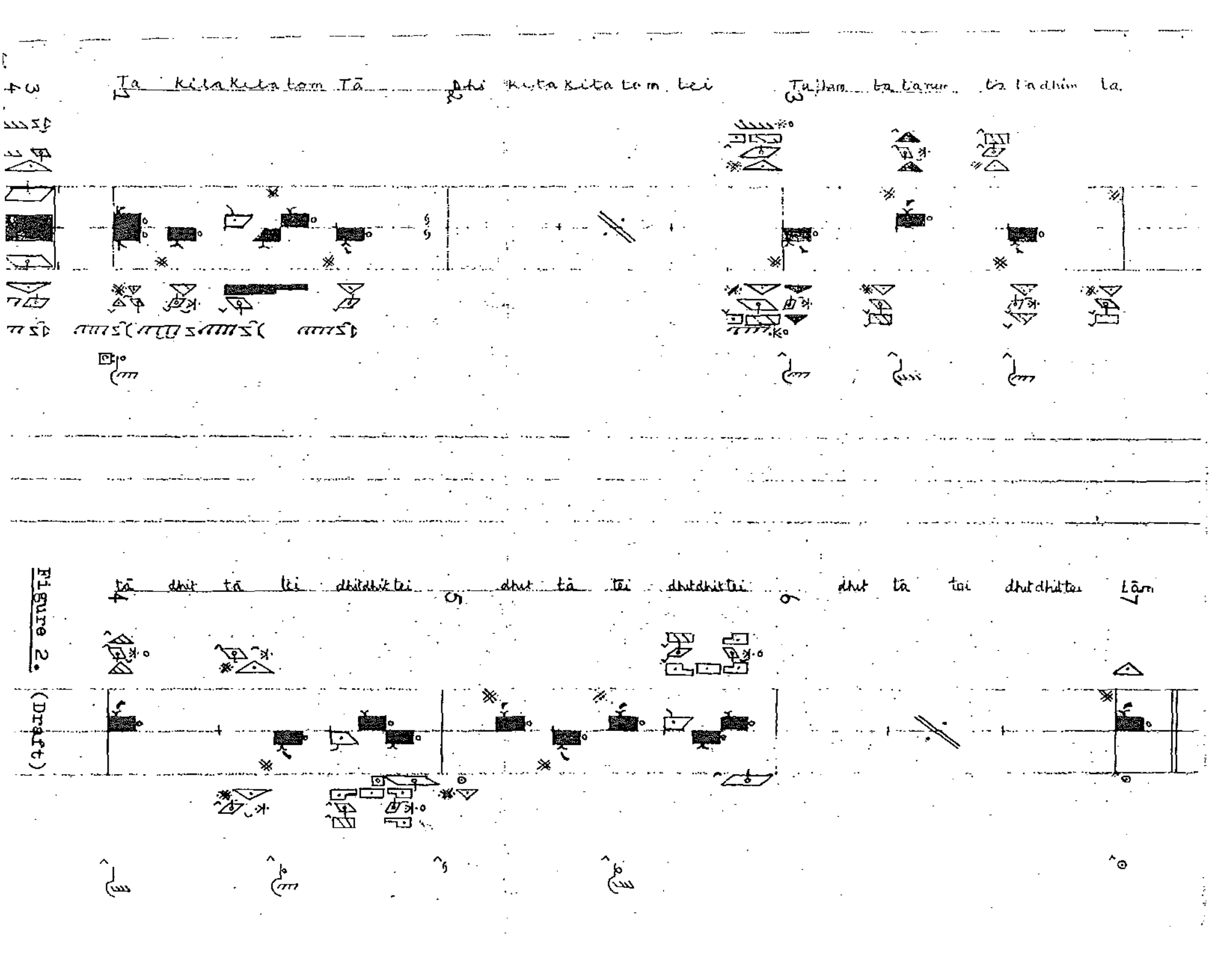


Figure 2. (Draft)

particular instrument that is played. However, not only do jazz musicians confine themselves to the structure of, say, the 'Blues', but they also confine themselves to a specific semantic intention during the course of any given 'piece'.

It is highly unlikely that a Blues saxophonist will, during a solo stretch, break into the strains of the Blue Danube Waltz. If that were to happen, then one would be aware that a statement was being made other than all that is included in the general sense that is conveyed by 'the Blues'. If a tap dancer were suddenly to break into an enchainement: 'chassé, pas de bourrée, glissade, jeté' (a sequence of steps from the vocabulary of the ballet), the audience would similarly assume that some additional statement was being made.

Specific adaptations of the rules of a symbolic system by an individual are in themselves subject to rules that allow us to recognise and distinguish the work of a Beethoven, a Picasso, a Stevie Wonder, a José Limón, Guy de Maupassant or Shakespeare. When Bach sat down and 'improvised' A Musical Offering, based on a five-note sequence suggested to him, what did he do? Was it totally 'free-form', or did he adhere to the basic rule-structures of western harmonics? What is the 'same' and what is 'different' about two completely improvised renditions of The Tiger Rag, one by Art Tatum and the other by Stephan Grapelli and David Grisman?

In a dance improvisation, there may be a prescribed set of rules, as for example, a structure which governs a particular stretch of movement, and another which governs an entire dance event. These improvisations are often rehearsed as frequently as any 'set' dance. Also, there are various usages to which improvisations are put. Choreographers Jennifer Muller, Twyla Tharp and Alwin Nikolais constantly use improvisation, both as a means to find movement patterns for a dance that is later 'set', and as a final product that is considered worthy of presentation on the stage.

The difference between Bharata Natyam and Graham's idiom of body language is interesting: a recital of the former is a highly structured improvisation. A recital of the latter consists of completely 'set' pieces of choreography. Yet, a goal connected with the performance of a Graham piece is to appear to be dancing extemporaneously, while the Bharata Natyam dancer attempts to convey the ease that comes after constant rehearsal, even when the movement combinations are improvised.

Improvisation in Bharata Natyam

In describing a Bharata Natyam recital, the term 'improvisation' is useful because no two performances of a dance necessarily use the same sequences of movement. The dancer normally varies the patterns of movement, the steps chosen and the hasta mudra (hand positions) used, and except for the novice dancer, each performer's version of a particular dance is, in movement terms, different. For example, Version I and Version II in Figs. 2 and 3 are two possible ways of performing 'the same' passage.

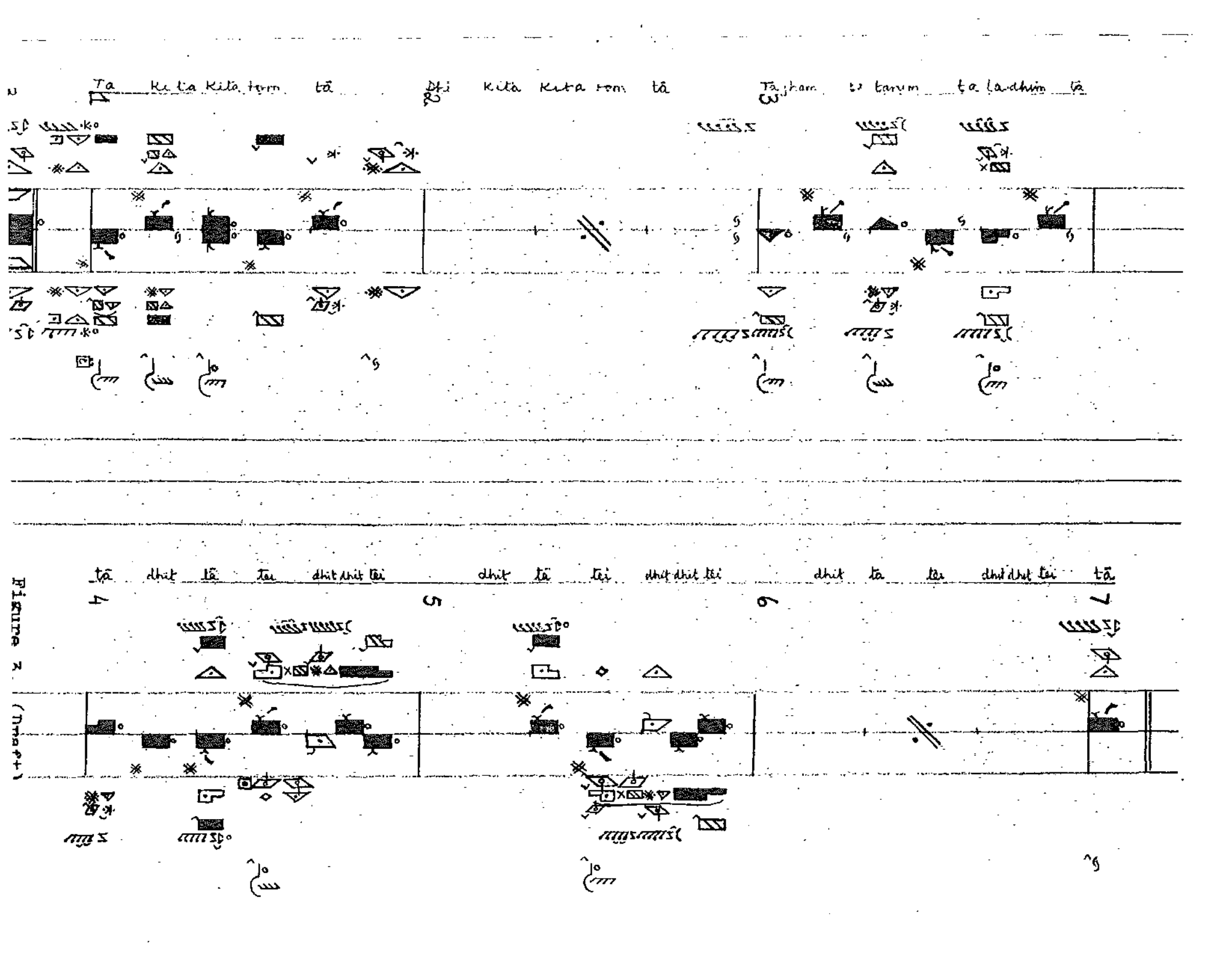


Figure 2 (Utsav)

In movement or visual terms alone, the stretches in Figs. 2 and 3 look completely different. The notated texts, too, illustrate the differences in the rhythmic patterns beaten by the dancer's feet, the hasta mudra used, and the sequential differences of movements of the arms, head and eyes. Yet, in terms of what these stretches are intended to convey, they are the same. To the Bharata Natyam dancer, they represent the same idea, just as the following two sentences in English convey the same idea:

1. She unlocked the door and walked in.
2. She entered with a key.

Although the two sentences use different words, they are loosely synonymous, given a cultural context in which we know that locks are placed on doors and that keys are used to unlock doors.

The context that makes the two sequences of movement 'the same' is the rhythmic combination that the two sequences express. The spoken syllables that express this rhythm have been placed along the left margin of the written texts, and the two stretches of movement are two different ways of expressing this rhythmic sound pattern, which is what confers similar identity to the two sets of movement. In an important sense, this rhythmic pattern can be seen as the 'meaning' of the two sequences, each of which is an alternative way of 'saying' that pattern in Bharata Natyam.

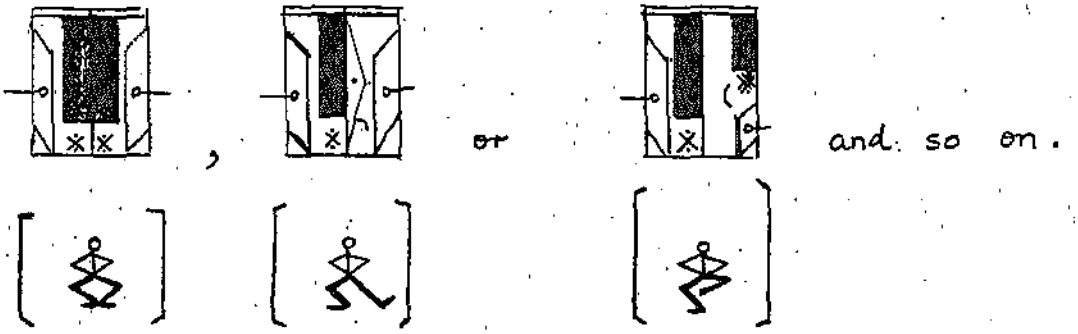
Like the ballet, the Fox Trot, Flamenco and many of the dances of Africa and the Caribbean, Bharata Natyam is an externally motivated idiom of dance. One of the general rules of these idioms is that they follow a certain set metric cycle. More specifically, Bharata Natyam follows the rules of the time measures of south Indian music. The examples in Figs. 2 and 3 are in a cycle of three beats (tisram) and follow the rule that each stretch of movement must end on the first beat of a metric cycle, which is why the written versions have the beginnings of an uncompleted seventh bar. If the reader looks carefully at the two versions, a similarity can be seen in the foot patterns, particularly in the rhythms that are produced by a performance of these steps. Beyond the rules concerning the musical structure are the rules that relate to the movements that the dancer chooses.

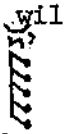
In Bharata Natyam, there is a set of steps that could be called the 'vocabulary' of the idiom in the same way as one can speak of a vocabulary of balletic steps, positions and moves. From that vocabulary, the dancer chooses steps that when performed cause certain patterns of sounds to be heard. That pattern conforms with the pattern of spoken syllables enunciated by the singer, and/or the rhythms played by the drum. The choice of 'steps' is dependent on the sounds a dancer wishes to make and the sounds made in the execution of each step pattern are different.

There are numerous alternative ways of performing these rhythmic syllables; therefore, when one performs, one makes a split-second decision from among a set of choices, some of which may never have been performed before. Since this is not the same as performing a prescribed sequence, the term 'improvisation' is found better to describe what happens in a Bharata Natyam performance than the word 'choreography'.

What I have explainded above is equally true of dramatic sequences in which the dancer is also externally motivated by the lyrics of a song. In these sections of the performance, the dancer has many alternative gestures to choose from in the interpretation of a single word, a whole sentence or a phrase. There are so many possibilities that no two performances are exactly the same, although the dancer might begin with a 'standard' set of gestures, just as a jazz musician might start with the basic theme of the melody he or she is about to interpret. The dancer's skill lies in the ability to perform different variations to the repetitions of a single line of verse.

These possibilities are still governed by rules. For example, the legs and feet will always be in one of the basic Bharata Natyam positions, e.g.



The hands will always form one of the thirty-one major hand positions such as  or , or else will be placed behind the back at the waist. The feet always mark rhythms in consonance with the metric cycle of the music. The eyes normally address (or follow) the direction of movement of the hand that is moving, or else they address a character imagined to be on the stage. Otherwise, the eyes are directed straight ahead. The importance of the eye movements is indicated in the written examples (See Figs. 2 and 3), where a special column has been assigned to the eyes [C], since these movements are constituent to Bharata Natyam. They are rarely, if ever, found in notated scores of the ballet or modern dances.

The above rules are those that make Bharata Natyam distinctive and they can all be elicited from an analysis of a written score. They make it possible for the dancer to communicate the meanings that she intends and they do not constrain her any more than the rules of English constrain an English-speaker. If one decided to make ungrammatical statements; to break too many rules, one would simply not be understood. The resulting movements would be nonsense -- literally, 'non-sense'. The rules are what make it possible for the dancer to convey meanings and, indeed, to move with fluency and ease.

Indian dancers are guided by the grammars or structures of their chosen idioms as they compose each single 'dance'. In fact, only an extremely accomplished dancer can improvise on stage. The novice first learns 'set pieces', composed by well-known teachers or by other well-known dancers. Later on, the young performer begins to compose short sequences in rehearsal or to make slight changes in the composition, until finally he or she becomes adept enough to compose large sections of a dance in performance. There is little difference in the process of composition at a rehearsal and composition on stage. One does not think with movement any differently, one just thinks much faster and cannot afford to make mistakes. The 'editing' process associated with choreography, during which one judges whether a movement would be appropriate, or when sequential substitutions are made, is also involved in improvisation -- even if there is less time to think. In fact, the less time there is to think, the more one depends on implicit rules.

Many Bharata Natyam dancers set the basic structure and decide on the general framework of a dance before they actually improvise. It is this basic structure that is referred to in the identification of a composition or a dance, and the 'structure' pertains more to the music, lyrics, and patterns of rhythmic syllables that are used than to the movement sequences that are performed to express that music. Even when credit is given to a particular guru (maestro) or dancer for the composition of a piece, this does not mean that the choreography as such has not been changed. At any given moment during performance, the dancer may create new combinations or even new gestures, so that one could say that he or she choreographs during performance, which, in a sense is the same as saying that the dancer 'improvises'.

Thinking with movement during a Bharata Natyam improvisation is therefore no different from thinking as part of the choreographic process. Whether one decided on a particular sequence of movements six months beforehand, or a milli-second before performing it, what one creates in both cases is a dance -- a piece of choreography -- something that has been composed.

Improvisation, Composition and Graham's Body Language

In western modern dance, improvisation is often used as a process during which new movement ideas for dances or choreography are explored. Sometimes, the choreographer improvises, relying on his or her dancers to remember what was done. They are also meant to reproduce it; rather like human instant re-play. Other composers, who themselves no longer perform, might ask their dancers to improvise in a certain way and then ask them to repeat a particular movement or work it into a phrase.[13] In either case, the improvisation performs the same function as the many drafts of a formal, academic paper where the objective is to obtain a product that has been refined during the versions prior to the final one.

Now that she no longer dances, Martha Graham depends upon the improvisations of her dancers to create the body of a new work. While she provides the basic scenario for the piece, it is 'fleshed out' when her dancers move in front of her and she molds, changes and directs what they do. The dancers operate not only under their impressions of what

Graham wants and the ideas described by her, but also under the distinct set of rules that underlie her standardized vocabulary of movements such as 'Cave turns', 'contractions', 'standing back falls', 'darts', 'sparkles', 'bell jumps', 'knee vibrations', 'knee crawls' and 'triplets'. Not just 'any movement' turns up in a Graham dance. This does not mean that Graham does not sometimes include new movements that are outside her formal vocabulary. Occasionally, a dancer will offer a movement that is 'new' which might also be acceptable to Graham as appropriate to the style and dramatic content of a particular work.

To most people who are familar with Graham's body language, it is fairly well-known that entire sections of certain dances were created by her company members, and that some parts of dances that she did choreograph were actually set to music by Louis Horst and other company members. Although the same process of communal input into choreography occurs in many other American dance companies, there is a fiercely protective attitude towards attributing the choreography to a particular individual. The fact that copyright laws can now be applied to choreographic works is testimony to the prevalence of such attitudes.

Cultural Values and Two Body Languages

In the United States, and throughout much of the English-speaking world, there is a choreographer-performer distinction made that in other countries, such as India and West Africa, is not usual. In India, more stress is laid on the guru-shishya (teacher-pupil) relationship, and the 'choreography' of an idiom of body language is attributed to a guru, who is also regarded as the bearer of a danced tradition. There is less interest in assigning credit to an individual than there is in identifying the dance and musical tradition within which a particular composition was created.

During a Bharata Natyam performance the dancer creates the dance artefact extemporaneously (within the boundaries described above) and so determines what is seen and heard on a particular occasion. The question of the 'origin' of an actual sequence of steps is of less importance than it is in American modern dance idioms. In fact, as we have seen, the Indian dancer clearly confines herself to an established vocabulary: she is not interested in creating 'new' movement elements, rather, her concern is with creating new combinations of these elements.

In the Graham case, even if a sequence was actually choreographed by a member of her company, the 'credit' for the sequence goes to Graham. To illustrate: when the 'daughters of the night' in Night Journey execute steps that were put together many years ago by a member of the chorus, or the character of the 'victim' in Cave of the Heart performs a solo that was built as much by as upon Yuriko Kikuchi, the choreography was then and is today attributed to Graham. Perhaps this is because of the fact that whether Graham herself created those particular combinations or not, the governing principle of these compositions is that set of rules that comprise the idiom of Graham's modern dance technique. It is interesting to note that although in modern dance, one thinks in terms of 'choreographies', that which is usually identified is the idiom of body language itself -- the 'technique' -- that is attributed to an individual.

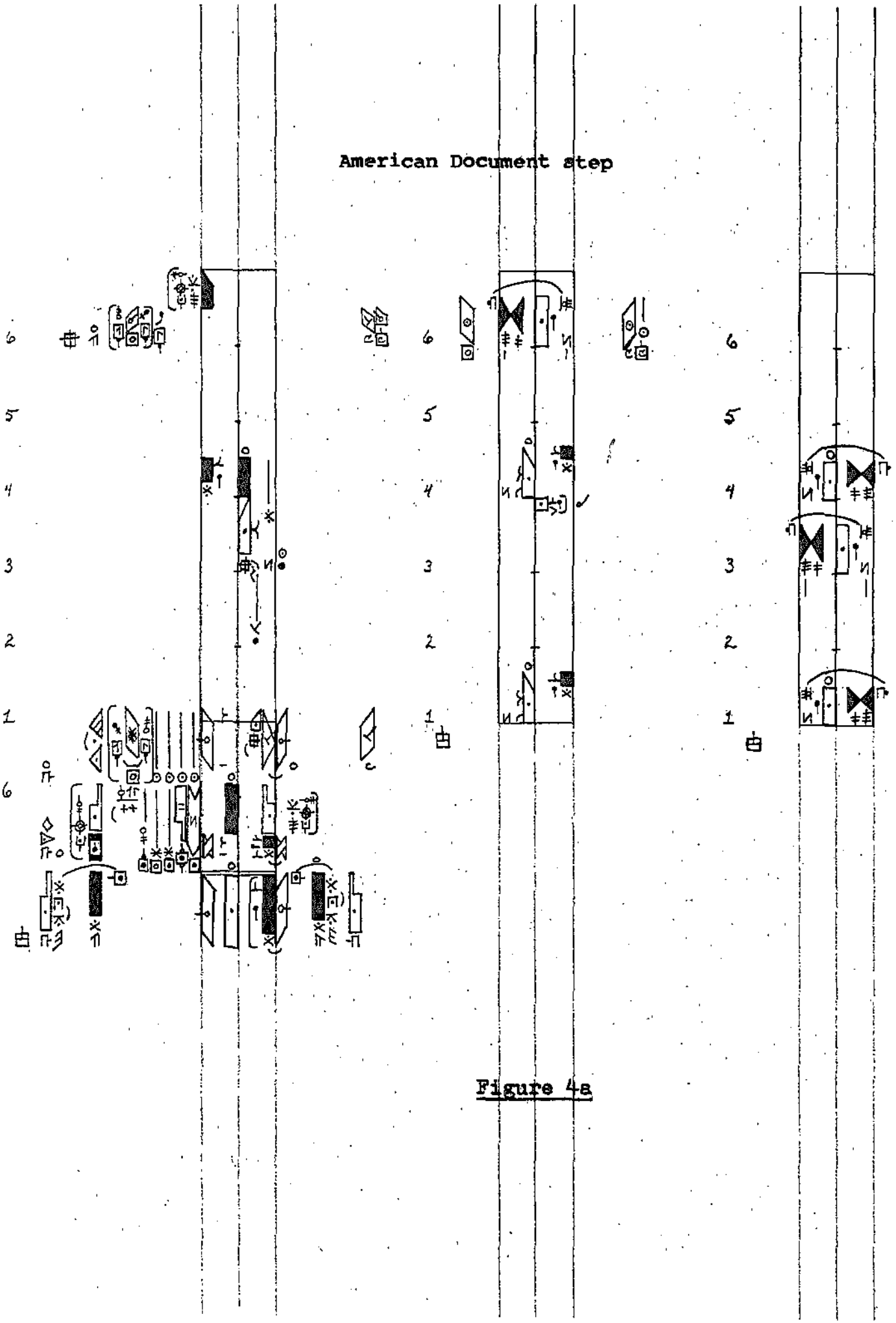
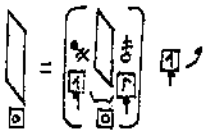


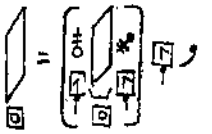
Figure 4a

American Document step

KEY



spiral



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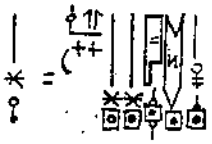
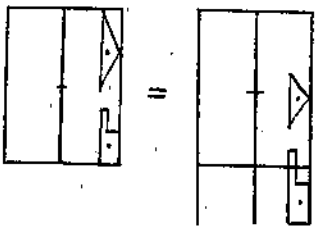
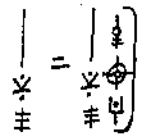


contraction

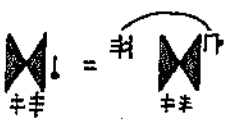


gestures completed on the beat

cupped hand



flexed foot



foot position at the ankle

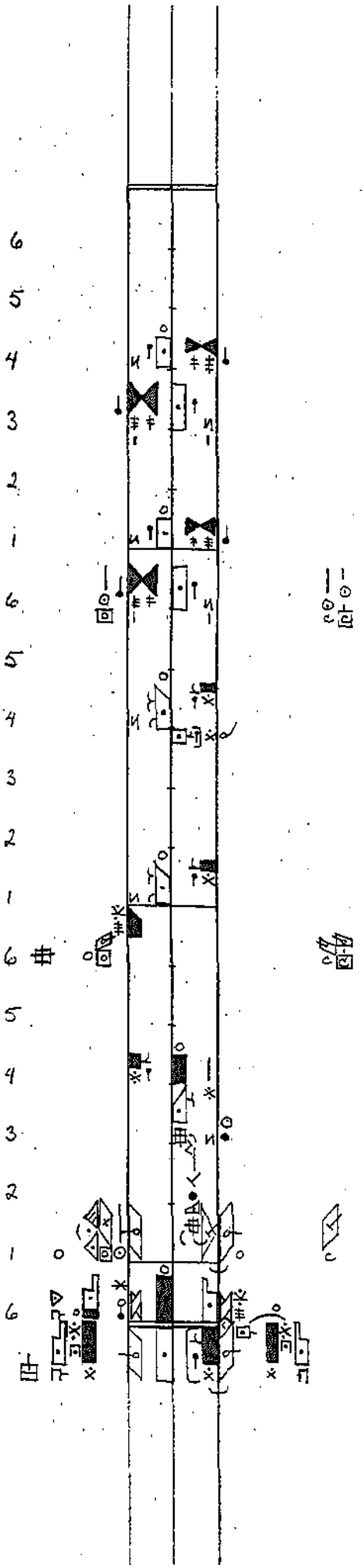


Figure 4b

Rules of Graham Technique

Some of the rules that underlie Graham's idiom of body language are these:[14]

1. Movement occurs slightly before the down-beat of a measure, so that by the time the down-beat occurs, the movement is already in progress. In the classroom, the length of the preliminary up-beat has been formalized in many exercises to equal either one, or one-half of, a beat. Underlying this convention is the idea that the dancer is meant to appear to 'cause the music to happen'.[15]

2. Movement of the pelvis, whether a contraction, release, tilt or shift, is the beginning of any larger movement and occurs before all movements. It is unusual for the pelvis to move as an isolated body part, and although there can be movements of other isolated body parts in certain choreographed phrases in general, these do not occur in a general technique class. An example of this rule can be seen in the written passages from American Document (See Fig. 4).

3. Movement through space that involves weight-transfers (from one supporting leg to the other, two legs to two legs or one leg, and one leg to two legs) is initiated by a shift of weight at the center of gravity in the pelvis. This can be seen in the contrast between the simple Graham 'walk' and the ballet dancer's 'walk', where the main feature in the latter case is a leg gesture that precedes the transference of weight.

If one were asked to improvise for Martha Graham, one would operate within the framework of these kinds of rules. To do otherwise would be to offer a non-sense, and the resulting combinations would certainly be unacceptable to her.

Even one's individual improvisations are a result of the various idioms in which one has been formally trained. In addition, they are governed by the rules for the body language of one's culture. A modern dancer is unlikely to include hand gestures or eye movements such as those found in the idiom of Bharata Natyam in any sequence that is performed, unless, perhaps, his or her intention were, say, to be satirical.

The choice of movements one makes is based upon the meanings one wishes to convey, and these meanings can only be communicated on the basis of shared understandings. Consequently, one always adheres to the set of rules that underlie the body language of one's idiom, and these, in turn, are connected with the body language of the wider society.[16]

Conclusion

We find that both the idioms of Bharata Natyam and Graham's 'idiolect' of modern dance are largely identified in terms of their underlying rules, whether it is the case that one watches an 'improvisation' or a 'composition' at any specific time and place. Analytically speaking, the difference between composing and improvising seems to us, at any rate, to be very slight. The thought processes involved are not different, although while improvising one does think much faster.

Whereas one can speak of composing without anyone having to move, the term 'improvisation' does seem to include an actual performance of the movements. Nevertheless, the artefact produced is as accommodating to notation as is a composition. One could imagine a dancer or choreographer 'improvising' directly onto a Laban staff, which would be the same as to say that they were 'composing', as when a musician 'composes' directly onto score-paper without playing the notes on any instrument.

When speaking of 'composition', attention seems generally to be focused on an end-product; an artefact that can then be treated as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Different societies place different values on these terms that is reflected in the ways that the terms are used. In south Indian society, there is less emphasis upon the creation of a product than upon the skills with which a performer manipulates a dance idiom, which in turn is dependent upon the dancer's fluency in his or her idiom of body language.

On the whole, in American modern dance idioms, there is a greater emphasis placed on the end-product: even improvisation is seen as a means towards an end. When a professional dancer improvises in performance, 'credit' for the improvisation usually goes to the leader of the company, whether Nikolais, Graham, Tharp, Cunningham or others. More often than not, the improvisation ends up as a 'set' piece, yet the term 'improvisation' is retained in order to emphasize the notion of spontaneity, novelty and individuality -- all important values in American society.

As one might expect from Indian society, there is less emphasis on the individual contribution over time;[17] a dance is regarded as public property and is identified by the idiom of movement to which it belongs, rather than by the name of the individual performer or choreographer. The idiom itself is not attributed to any particular individual but regarded as a public, social fact. This is in strong contrast to American modern dance idioms where the choreographer often attempts, not only to compose new dances, but to create a new 'dialect' of body language, which is then identified by the name of an individual. Because of this, there is an emphasis, in the American case, on 'breaking the rules' of existing idioms[18] and of creating what are generally regarded as 'new' movements. Great value is placed on the notion of improvisation as an exploratory process, as compared with the Indian case, where, even though new movements are often created, the performer is not interested in their novelty value per se, nor is the dancer's social persona so strongly identified with them.

We have come to some tentative conclusions from this preliminary attempt to compare two widely different idioms of human body language: the distinction between improvisation and composition that is generally assumed in the United States (including the writers we mentioned earlier) is based on the cultural difference of perceiving the individual as a more important entity than the whole, in contrast to the Indian view, in which the individual is seen as intimately bound up in the whole society, and, indeed is a kind of expression of the whole.

The two terms, 'improvisation' and 'composition', have different meanings to members of different societies, although they can be useful to distinguish between dances that include pre-arranged movements and dances that are composed, as it were, in performance. We are convinced that the distinction between the terms by no means marks a difference in the 'end-products' or in the processes whereby the dance artefacts are created. 'Improvising' and 'composing' with reference to dancing are complex ideas and complex acts. They want handling with great care. In any case, discussion of them should be guided by the data that one seeks to understand.

Thinking in terms of body language (not 'thinking in movement') does assist one to uncover the rules that govern an idiom of movement, and these rules are referred to whether one improvises or composes. This leads to a better understanding of what human beings are actually doing and 'be-ing' when they move.

Rajika Puri
Diana Hart

FOOTNOTES

1. See Williams, 1979:42, for the important distinction between the dance, a dance and dancing. 'The dance', used as a term of referral, simply means the sum of the world's dances, not an internal process or an experience of moving.

2. The excerpt was from Dasavataramulu in the idiom of Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh, in which the ten incarnations of Vishnu (Dasavatara) are described. The dance is accompanied by lyrics which are interpreted with hasta-abhinaya (hand gestures), and the performer may vary his or her gestures in the attempt to convey the narrative meaning of the lyrics. The music is set to misra chapu (a metrical cycle of seven beats) and in the non-narrative sequences the dancer improvises steps that fit into this rhythmic cycle.

3. Often people seem to see more of their own associations and ideas about something than they see -- or even are curious about -- what is actually there. Associations between age and rule-boundedness, i.e. 'ancient culture' = tradition and rules; 'new culture' = freedom and non-rules were the common ones made.

4. 'Contact improvisation'is a post modern dance form that originated in the 1960's and is attributed to the efforts of Steve Paxton. It involves improvised movement of two or more bodies that remain in physical contact with each other throughout. Motivation for the movements lies in the effect of gravity and other natural forces upon the momentum of the body. Ideally, one has minimal 'conscious' input into the movements.

5. For example, Benesh (1977), Eshkol Wachmann (1958), Sutton Movement Shorthand. These systems differ widely from Laban's script in important ways and, were Margolis speaking of them, instead of Laban's script, his assessments would be more accurate.

6. "...an intentional action is not the same as a physical movement since the latter can be described in various ways according to one's point of view and one's beliefs about the person performing it. One cannot specify an action, as opposed to a purely physical movement, without taking into account what the agent intended" (Best, 1974:193).

7. We would ask the reader to exercise great care here: musical scores bear terms such as 'diminuendo', 'ritard', 'allegro con brio' and such, but these are not references to the anatomy of the hands and arms, the vocal chords; they are relevant to how the music may be played, but not to the 'mechanics' of it.

8. For the difference between the usage of linguistic analogies and linguistic models with reference to the dance and movement, see Kaeppler (1982).

9. Jennifer Muller danced for many years in the José Limón dance company, after which she joined Louis Falco (another Limón dancer) as partner in his dance company. Eventually, Muller and Falco split, each retaining around half of the dancers of his company and filling out their companies with younger dancers. Today Muller is best known outside of the United States -- in France and the Netherlands primarily. Her style makes use of some of the principles upon which Limón built his style, and is pervaded by heightened sensuality and an extremely high level of energy. She is choreographically influenced by one of her earlier teachers, Antony Tudor, as far as her sense of phrasing and concatenation are concerned.

10. Lévi-Strauss' notion of bricolage could be applied to this process. We would agree with him that, for the 'bricoleur' and myth-maker, as for the dancer, "His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials that is always finite" (1966:17).

11. See Myers (1981) for a more detailed discussion of the notion of ungrammaticality in spoken and body languages.

12. Notation for Figures 1 and 4 was executed by Jane Marriett from the Dance Notation Bureau in New York.

13. Indeed, the very word 'dancer' may be seen to have the non-material, fluid nature of categories on the whole. When one thinks of a dancer (in western terms, at least), one thinks first of a lithe creature between the ages of, say, fifteen and thirty. But the category in fact can be said to include those who no longer dance, those who may never have danced professionally but who choreograph, those who perform and choreograph, those who have never taken a 'formal dance class' and other possibilities. Along the same lines, but speaking of the category of "emotional gestures" in choreography, Humphrey states that "there are many feelings which can be expressed in so many ways that there really is no one pattern for them" (1959:118).

14. It is important to note here that this is only a fractional listing of rules that can be found in Graham technique. As with the rules of spoken language, these also are subject to change over time, and those presented here represent those learned by Hart during the first nine years of her exposure to Graham: 1969-1978. There are 'archaic', as well as new and updated versions of these concepts.

15. The two notated versions of the same stretch of movement presented in Figure 4 demonstrate that, in general, underlying rules and structures can indeed be shown in a Labanotation score. Rather than go to the trouble of writing symbols in an overlapping fashion to demonstrate that they have already begun before the musical beat, one can provide a key explaining this concept and writing symbols within the beat marks, which is easier to read. This is similar to a musical key signature which informs one of the mandatory flats or sharps to be played for the duration of a piece of music. Other compound symbols for danced movements may be abbreviated into one concise symbol, such as can be seen in Figure 4 for the pelvic contraction, cupped hand and spiral. This is extremely useful, for it distinguishes clearly between these specific Graham movements and those from other idioms that may loosely resemble them.

16. American Modern Dance arose primarily as a rebellion to the strictures of Ballet, such as outward rotation of the femur, the pointed foot, resistance to gravity, and 'gracefulness' in general. At first, these principles were simply reversed: where the foot was before pointed, it now was flexed, etc. This revolution in dance technique was accompanied by the suffragettes and other turn-of-the-century movements in the roles and rules of society.

17. We refer here to the absence in traditional Indian society of the notion of individualism as it developed in the west, cf. Dumont (1970:4-20).

18. One notes that the 'breaking of rules' presupposes the existence of rules and that these rules are known to the persons who break them. Also, the resultant idiom (dialect or idiolect) depends on which set of rules of which idiom are broken. Each 'new' idiom of American modern dance comes about from the breaking of different rules which explains why there is a lack of homogeneity among the various idioms subsumed under the general rubric of 'modern dance'.

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