DOCUMENTATION OF DANCED PERFORMANCES:
VIDEO-RECORDING AND MOVEMENT NOTATION

It is commonly held in many disciplines that video-recording represents an adequate means of documentation of movement data.[1] The question that seldom appears to be raised, however, is 'adequate for what purpose?' In the dance profession, where movement notation has been used for a number of years, video-recording is generally perceived to be an <u>alternative</u> to movement notation in the documentation of danced performances. In anthropology, the use of movement writing by a small number of movement specialists[2] has not yet prompted much discussion amongst the majority of anthropologists and so a reliance on filmed documentation is maintained. It will be suggested here that the relationship between these two recording methods is analogous to that between sound recording on disk or tape and a music score and, therefore, are complementary rather than alternative methods. This paper will describe what it is that both video-recordings and movement notations record. A look at the data discernible from video-recordings will reveal its limitations for documentation and provide reasons for the preferred use of a movement writing script.

Video-recording

A video-recording is commonly thought of as recording the 'total event'; that is, the excitement and mood of the performance as well as the observable elements such as the steps, the costumes, the staging, etc. Indeed the strength of a video-recording is its portrayal of the <u>performing</u> of an event, illustrating the performance qualities of the actors. If well recorded, it can indicate some of the interaction between audience and actors regarding the mood created, but anyone who has compared their impression of an actual event with the video-record of the same performance will have noted how little 'performance electricity' really makes it through the view-finder. Often this is countered by creative camera-work that invariably is counter-productive to the aim of comprehensive documentation -- reconstruction in the case of danced recordings and the analysis of an event in an anthropological situation.

Another stated strength of a video-recording is the immediate visual impression one gains of the event. Such impressions have more to do with the costuming, the spatial settings and the individual interpretations of the performers than the actual bodily moves which, because of the costuming and the lighting, are often obscured. In contrast, the visual impression gained by a notator from a movement score centres, primarily, around the actions of the performers and their relationship to the space and the settings and

other performers.

An extremely important feature of a video-recording is that it is a record of one interpretation of the movement event. Thus, it allows subsequent viewers to 'catch' those particular performers' actions, but in only a limited way does this one example represent the total of all possible actions <u>for that event</u>. For example, consider a video-recording of Swan Lake by the Australian Ballet. This one video-recording is an example of one performance of Swan Lake and would not be considered to represent all the different productions of Swan Lake performances by different companies throughout the world. That is, it is a particular example from which generalisations can begin to be made about all Swan Lake performances once further particular examples are viewed. It is not clear from this one example, nor may it be even from a diachronic set of video-recordings, what are the essential elements that identify Swan Lake from all other dances. This is in direct contrast to a movement notation score which, if a true record, serves to establish the identity of the event.

Far from giving a comprehensive account of a movement event there are certain kinds of information that cannot be discerned solely from a video-recording. The limitations of the medium of film especially relate to the semantics of movement and the perceptions of observers. While the absence of this hidden semantic information may not detract from the enjoyment of watching a danced performance or a ceremonial ritual on a screen for an ordinary viewer, by itself a video-recorded performance does not assist a serious investigator towards an understanding of the event if he or she is not already familiar with the culture <u>and the action system</u> within which that event is placed. Being raised within a particular culture does not automatically allow the understanding of all action sign systems even within one's own culture (for example, a ballet performance, a church service or a cricket game), far less of other cultures. Actions, as learned movement patterns, are culturally shaped and thus do not carry universal meanings.

The knowledge of the viewer of a video-recording determines what kind of semantic information will be discerned about a movement event. Cameras perceive the movement of performers but not the intentions that govern those movements and make them actions, in the semasiological sense of the term (Williams, 1982). Within our own culture we can often read the intentions of a sequence of movements; for instance, a hand waving in greeting can be distinguished from an arm brushing away flies. The actions of another culture, however, can seldom be interpreted simply from our own conceptual framework. Without knowledge of a particular action system, significant actions cannot be separated from insignificant movements through observation alone. The information gathered from

observation may not provide access to the rules that establish the parameters of that particular action system. Numerous variations may be observed to occur but these are unlikely to be all the variations permissible.

On a perceptual level, a fixed camera angle offers a recording only of a limited perspective, that which is immediately in front of the camera. Even a seated audience in a theatre has great flexibility because the range of their gaze can be increased by movement of the head, allowing a greater 'horizon'. Another result of a fixed camera angle is that it tends to create a bias for one spatial perspective and to impose what can appear as a 'front' on the 'performance' space. A non-fixed camera angle invariably obscures the actors' relationship to the space. For example, an actor can be seen to be moving forward in relation to his or her own body, but if the camera follows the actor, the exact direction of that forward movement in relation to the performing space is often unclear; is the actor moving directly forward in the performance space or towards a corner of the space or towards an object, etc.? Camera work following a particular individual often also cuts out of view other actors thus obscuring inter-relationships between actors.

A camera's view is not only limited laterally but also in its perspective of depth. Human eyes use many clues accurately and automatically to discern how near or far events occur. While giving the appearance of a 3-dimensional visual representation, a television image remains 2-dimensional, especially to someone who is used to using a written script by virtue of which one can see around corners, as it were. Much of the apparent depth on a television screen is interpreted by the perceptual ability of a viewer and is not inherent in the video picture. Visual clues we use to judge distance on a screen include the relative size of figures or objects, details of the visibility of body parts or objects and the relative level of feet on and off the ground. Film, both static and moving images,[3] flattens the near-far dimension leaving the viewer to rely primarily on the background to judge distance. So often in theatrical danced performances backdrops are plain, or worse, black or the same colour as dancers' costumes, often through lighting effects, and if one is watching the recording for other than entertainment purposes, this becomes a real problem for accurately gauging distance.

While video-tapes of out-of-doors performances greatly aid the perception of track data[4] as the background is generally less uniform, conflation of the near-far dimension results in the track data being most easily perceived relative to the performed steps. By this I mean that the pathway of the dance is most easily described in terms of so many steps towards the camera, and so many steps in another direction, etc. This description is in contrast

to stating that the dancer is traveling to a specific point in space, as may be marked by a tree or a mark on the ground. While descriptions of the number of steps in a given direction may be sufficient, and indeed the relevant, data, it remains that this is the primary, and often the only, track data that the video reveals.

Circular patterns on a video-recording are especially difficult to judge as their roundness must be inferred from the angle of the actors' bodies and by the surrounding visual data. This is also where a fixed camera angle reinforces the illusion of one area being the front of a performance area as it highlights one section of a circle and privileges actions closest to the camera. It is difficult for a viewer not to privilege movement information that is easily seen over actions that occur facing away from the camera. The video-recording of performances that include music as well as movement provides an interesting problem. In the recording of typically western theatre dance performances, the musicians are out of view to the camera. Even though the music is audible, the focus is on the dancers. But such a relationship cannot be presumed to be the same for all cultures; the structure of some Indian and traditional Aboriginal dances, for instance, relies on cues between the musicians and dancers.

While a video-recording is often taken to be the nearest thing to being present at an event, the difference in spatial relationships between a viewer in an audience and a viewer of a video screen deserves mention, especially in regard to the reconstruction of an event. Viewers of a live performance are part of those performances and spatial patterns are remembered in relation to their own bodies. When viewing a video-recording, there is no such personal relationship between the viewer and the spatial patterns and a 'false distancing' occurs from the non-involvement of a detached audience. Additionally, the smaller screen area requires a finer spatial discrimination ability to remember where certain actions occurred.

The slow-motion facility on a video machine can aid the reconstruction of an event from a video-recording as intricate and fast movements can be viewed more easily at a slower performance speed. However, the concentration on a slowed movement does not necessarily accurately reveal all of the details of that movement performed in real time. The most obvious reason for this is that the dynamics of a real movement are not revealed at a slowed speed. Dynamics not only give information about accented movements and the relative intensity of body parts in an action, they also aid perception as to how the body is supported, that is, where the distribution of weight is placed on the feet. This is not readily seen in slow motion viewing. Rhythm is also obscured in a slow motion representation and it is the rhythm of a movement that very often can provide additional qualitative information about an

action.

Reconstruction of a danced work from video-tape is viable on a short-term basis only, as it invariably relies on someone familiar with the work using the video-recording as a memory aid. In such a person's absence video-tapes remain as curiosity pieces that offer a visual image of an unknown work without any means of undersanding it. This argument also applies to ethnographic films which, without accompanying analysis and explanation, remain as interesting but uninformative examples of, most often, 'exotic' cultures.

Video-recordings do offer certain viewers the opportunity to view a performance that may not otherwise be possible. However, this medium is no more neutral than any other medium and if made without an understanding of the subject, the data may not be accurately represented. Especially required is an understanding of the non-universality of the meanings of human movement. Video technology is part of western culture and therefore, without sophisticated knowledge of alternative views of subjects and perspective, is most generally used in a way that is appropriate to our view[5] of events.

Movement Notation

There have been numerous notation systems developed but the following discussion refers to the two most widely used systems worldwide at present: Labanotation and Benesh notation. This discussion aims only to describe in general what it is that the notation systems record, as specific information can be found in several available texts.

Many of the limitations of documentation by film and video-tape are overcome by movement writing scripts. Superficially, the notation text itself appears to give the reader only structural information about the actions: where body parts are in space and how they interrelate with other body parts or with other bodies or objects; the relationship between actors; between actor(s) and music, if used; and between actor(s) and the performing space. To this is added the dynamics of actions, which are represented through the recording of timing and through specific symbols that indicate relative energy levels and muscular intensities.

However, the semantics of the actions are also an intrinsic part of this record. They are the criteria by which decisions are made about what to notate and how to notate it. Only those movements that are meaningful, intentional and significant to the action sign system of which they form a part are included in the notation text as part of that action system. That is, the entire body does not need to be shown for every action. Notation scripts

can be used to record as much or as little information as is relevant to the actions. By considering the intentions of actors and making informed choices, that is, choices which are relevant to the idiom as to what is significant and therefore must be recorded, the notator is going beyond a mere kinelogical description of movement.

Movement notation scores can indicate that meaningful level alongside the observable elements and thus provide reconstructions that are based on the rules of the idiom of movement, and in the case of dance, reconstructions that are based on the original choreographer's intentions, thus allowing further original interpretations. If a dance work changes, they could also provide a record of a choreographer's development of that work.

Movement notation systems require the movement phrases to be transcribed from a physical medium to a written medium, and this involves a process of translation[6] to separate significant from incidental movements. The symbols of a movement text directly describe movement concepts, for example, bending, contracting and stretching, and spatial concepts, for example, below, to the right of the body, etc. (Farnell, 1984:190). This minimizes the translation and, providing the notator is conversant with the movement idiom being notated, allows descriptions to remain within the terms of the system described.

Movement writing texts need not, but can, indicate the individual qualitative traits of the actor. Analogous to written texts of spoken language, which do not indicate voice quality and pitch of speakers except through punctuation, movement texts do not necessarily record an individual's personal style of performing a move. A notator can either record descriptively, that is, noting exactly the moves of each particular performer, or prescriptively, where only the essential, and minimal, features of the movement are recorded. Most scores of theatrical danced performances are of this latter type, as the choreographer's intentions regarding a movement are given precedence over the performers' interpretations and limitations. In this way, a movement score differs significantly from a video-recording. While a video-recording remains as an account of an individual's interpretation, a notation score can indicate the essential elements that comprise the identity of the event.

It is often asked whether a movement writing system records movements or positions. Farnell notes that positions are simply "pauses between movements" (1984:190). Movement notation (each system to a different degree) is able to record both the movement that precedes and succeeds each body position and the various points along the movement path if necessary. In showing the connection between movements, the movement text becomes more than

a series of still pictures. Additionally, depending on what is significant for that action, it is possible in Labanotation to record a description of the general direction of a movement or the specific location to which a limb or the whole body moves.

A feature of learning movement notation is an increased ability to visualise movement. Notators are able to construct a visual impression of a movement event from reading a movement score, and can actually see more of the movement this way than from a video screen. This is because the movement writing text accounts for the 3-dimensional aspect, as well as incorporating a 360 degree perspective, of the movement. Regardless of familiarity with an action system, a skilled reader can establish a personal spatial relationship to the actions in a score, and thus to the event, through their ability to visualise the movement.

Similar to a musician's score, what a notator sees through reading a movement score is the essential elements and parameters of performance from which actors can then add their personal qualities and interpretations. Apart from their entertainment and personal history value, analytically, video-recordings are extremely useful to a notator as a memory aid and as an example of a possible interpretation of the event, analogous to musical recordings. It is a notation score, however, that indicates the boundaries of permissible interpretations of actions in an action system.

The analysis of movement data requires clear information about all body parts of all actors involved at all times, and their appropriate use of space. This is where a movement score can provide comprehensive information that can be viewed outside the confines of the 'real-time' in which events occur. Even a video-recording limits a viewer to sequential movements and so often video-cameras focus on what is moving, distorting the use of stillness. Additionally, choices of what to include in the video-frame must be made before an analysis is undertaken and therefore are premature, and often inappropriate, to later analyses. (Obviously I am not speaking of videos created as works in their own right, simply of documentations of 'live' performances.)

The preceding discussion outlines only some of the differences between the two methods of documentation and in no way covers all of the arguments for each method of documentation. This paper was written in the hope that it will prompt further discussion about the demands of documentation and the need for literacy in those professions that analyse human movement in this International Year of Literacy, 1990.

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NOTES

1. This can be seen through the reliance on this recording method over other methods in many disciplines, especially the dance profession and social anthropology.

2. For example, Grau, Farnell, Durr, Hart-Johnson, Puri and Dail-Jones.

3. Of course, film records a series of extremely fast static images that are perceived to be 'moving' and it is to this that I refer.

4. That is, movement data that pertains to the spatial pathway along which the dancer proceeds.

5. This has been highlighted by the study of Worth and Adair, "Through Navajo Eyes," in which the Indians were given the camera and filmed themselves in their own way. Their use of the camera clearly shows their differing values of subjects and perspective.

6. Definitions of 'translation' and 'transcription' follow Wellisch (1978).

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