

## The representations of dance: a sociological analysis

*Josiane Medina*<sup>\*</sup>

*Marcos Ruiz*<sup>\*\*</sup>

*Danielle B. L. de Almeida*<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

*Andréa Yamaguchi*<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>

*Wanderley Marchi Jr.*<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Dance is a social manifestation that represents characteristic aspects of a society and that can be understood by different aspects of analysis. The objective of this study was to analyze the perspective of pre-college board exam students about dance. The data were analyzed descriptively, based on the Pierre Bourdieu sociological approach. It was possible to verify that dance is a cultural capital through a series of dominating structure social conditions. Thus, different characteristics can be identified in the dances of men, women, children, the elderly, the poor and the rich.

**Key words:** Dance. Social perception. Bourdieu.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The first movements presented by the child since birth, even through reflex movements, demonstrate a utilitarian manifestation that somehow represent the individual's needs for survival, whether through the search for food, locomotion or another form of corporal manifestation.

Throughout its growth and development, basic motor skills like sitting, crawling, rolling and jumping are achieved, becoming a support to acquire more elaborate movements that lead to creation actions and the representation of more refined movements. Thus, over time the individual's diverse corporal actions acquire a voluntary quality through which they will demonstrate their feelings, desires and emotions.

These voluntary gestures present characteristics acquired from living among people and the environment and can be presented as the identity of a certain group.

---

<sup>\*</sup> Master's in Physical Education. Faculty of the State University of Londrina. Physical Education and Sports Center. Londrina-PR, Brazil. E-mail: josi\_medina@pop.com.br

<sup>\*\*</sup> Master's in Physical Education from the Federal University of Paraná. Department of Physical Education. Curitiba-PR, Brazil. E-mail: mruiz@hotmail.com

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Specialist in Contemporary Dance – Body from the Paraná College of Arts. E-mail: daniberbel@hotmail.com

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Master's in Physical Education from the Federal University of Paraná. Department of Physical Education. Curitiba-PR, Brazil. E-mail: andreaafb@hotmail.com

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> PhD. Faculty member at the Federal University of Paraná. Departments of Physical Education and Social Sciences. Curitiba-PR, Brazil. E-mail: marchijr@ufpr.br

Therefore, dance can be understood as a form of elaborate movement that provides elements or representations of people's culture and is considered a manifestation of habits and customs of a certain society.

For decades, humanity established direct contact between its dance and representations in society, translating needs, yearnings and transformations, as well as the form of manifestation for its beliefs, its religions and its traditions. As a social being, man makes use of this form of expression to represent a culture, however, this process does not necessarily include in its reflection mechanisms needed for the formation of the social institutions in which it is inserted.

When Bourdieu (2003) established the concept of *habitus*, considering the systems of relationships subjective, he affirms that a relationship should not be established as a sum of biological individuals, but rather as a system of disposition in which objective practices can be based on impersonality, reflecting diversity in homogeneity.

The logic agents use when opting for this or the other practice cannot be understood unless its dispositions around sports, which themselves are a dimension of a particular relationship with the body, are re-inserted in the dispositions system, the habitus, which is the generating base of lifestyles. (BOURDIEU, 1993, p.74)

Thus, the way the individual thinks and reflects about certain actions and attitudes stems from knowledge and the formation of a history linked to family influence and education. These play core roles in the set of knowledge associated with development of the habitus and the acquisition of new attitudes.

## **1.2 Dance in history: some aspects**

Corporal movement executed by primitive peoples was their main form of communication and communion. Dance was not merely corporal movement, but also the connection between humans and the gods. They danced for the harvest, fertilization, fun, thanks and most especially for communication and understanding among members of that society.

Before taking a stage to perform theatrical artistic dance, the dance movement was first an emotional overflowing, disorderly manifestation of fears, affection, ire and refusal, without any other particular organization, possibly, than an impassioned attraction for rhythm [...] it successively became a magical charm, rite, ceremony, popular celebration, and finally, simply fun (OSSONA, 1988, p.42).

Repetitive movements, tireless gestures, the body taken to ecstasy all highlight this phase of dance's trajectory throughout its existence. At first, there was no concern about performance and body yield to reach high levels of technical quality. However, its presence in the everyday life of people was very close, because the moment of dance was not separated from experienced facts. Everything was very organic and natural in dance and living in society.

As time went by, humanity began to live in isolated groups. And thus diverse societies emerged and each one began to have its own dances with an identification function. (BOURCIER, 1987).

The dances kept improving, people were dancing more and more and every move was transformed into fun and entertainment. Humans began to feel pleasure in dancing and watching dance. People who danced began to dedicate themselves to it, to "rehearse" and transmit their dances to others, which was later called an "audience". Families with fortunes comprised the first audiences and dance was performed at public balls (OSSONA, 1988).

The first dancer on record came from the French court, Louis IV. Teachers and schools of dance emerged with him and they contributed towards the transformation of dance, going from communion with gods to entertainment and professionalism.

Besides that, professionalism, with professional dancers and dance teachers emerged for the first time. This is an important fact: until then, dance was a relatively free corporal expression. After that, it becomes an awareness of possibilities. Of the esthetic expression of the human body of the utility of rules to explore it. Furthermore, no doubt professionalism heads towards a higher technical level [...] dance teachers do not belong to a low social class: they used to be part of the princes immediate circle [...] (BOURCIER, 1987, p. 64).

With the establishment of rules and norms, the steps that today we call classical ballet were codified. Pierre de Beauchamps was responsible for the first codifications of

dance and with the creation of the first dance school, ballet became a profession, transforming the bodies of ballerinas into veritable tools for connecting an idea.

After that, dance demanded hours of rehearsal from its interpreters to shape their bodies in a pre-established proposal. They increasingly sought to exceed the limits of their bodies believing they would thus reach perfection in movements and gestures.

Many conflicts were created and many ballerinas did not dance for a long time, making it improper to follow the existing rules. In the midst of this scenario, there emerges Isadora Duncan, an American dancer who proposed a completely different dance from academic classical ballet at the time.

According to Navas and Dias (1992), Isadora sought inspiration in movements of nature. A free dance was created without corsets, stockings and point shoes and was presented in barefoot choreographies dressed in silk tunics (inappropriate vestments for classical dancers at the time, who danced with skin-tight stockings and knits).

Isadora contributed much more than simply break paradigms of corporal movement. Her contribution helped establish a new vision of movement that respected the anatomic standards for each dancer, not allowing the professional life of the dancer to be reduced due to wear caused by the execution of repetitive and exhaustive movements.

Therefore, dance was given a new concept before society. Dance is not just an activity of the noble French bourgeoisie classes, but also of the common people who only like to move the body as a form of expression.

Modern dance appears as a proposal for movement that is different from what had been seen by classical dancers thus far. Diverse techniques and countless schools emerge, but all exploring the rules and codifications of steps and gestures as a means to seek esthetics in the desired movement.

With the improvement of modern dance techniques, other esthetic principles were incorporated into dance. The search for diverse and new movements and the breaking down of academic standards made it possible for theoreticians to begin to think of what was being danced. Rudolf Von Laban stood out for his contribution with a method to analyze movement (SANTOS, 2001).

Researcher, plastic artist and choreographer Rudolf Von Laban's theories of movement, developed in Germany in the first half of the 20th Century, could be seen as a

third way of understanding, like an overlay of objective and subjective approaches, between the theories and practice of action (FERNANDES, 2002).

An observer of a person in movement is immediately aware, not only of the routes and rhythms of movement, but also the atmospheres the routes bear, since the forms of movement through space are touched by feelings and ideas. And the content of thought and emotions we have as we move or observe movement can be analyzed just as the forms and lines drawn in space (LABAN apud FERNANDES, 2002, p. 18).

Laban allowed dancers to analyze movements that before were only executed. Socially, dance advanced to an important position used to observe and improve esthetics of bodies that dance. Thus, the scenario created by Laban placed dance and dancers in the midst of an understanding where the bodies that dance do not only execute movements represented by someone, but they think and analyze the possibilities of creation from a repertoire of images and ideas constructed during life. However, the vision of an art for the elite still persists in the general opinion of contemporary society:

In our “civilized society”, if we can still call it such, dance, like most everything else, became valorized as a commercializable product, just as quickly elaborated as consumed and easy to digest. A great many of our young dancers are only interested in what they already know through the means of mass communication, the ephemeral artifices that are in fashion, preferring immediate applause to the inner feeling of accomplishment (OSSONA, 1988, p. 09).

Thus, despite the change underscored in the evolutionary sense of dance, there is still a problem to understand: how do the social segments perceive these bodies that dance and the vision that is formed by them in current society? Another pertinent question is: what is the opinion of a certain society about the manifestation and analysis of the representation through expressions and corporal movement?

## **2 The Method**

The study was conducted in two phases, the first referring to a bibliographic study about the theme in question, and the second an exploratory study.

The exploratory study was conducted at the School and Pre College Board Exam Course in São José dos Pinhais, PR, with the participation of 59 college board exam students, 30 women and 29 men, between 16 and 20 years of age. The sample was characterized according to student education level. Students or recent high school graduates answered the questionnaire. We decided on this group because they are in a phase of choosing a professional field and are not deeply involved in a specific area of knowledge.

The questionnaire included open and closed questions about the group's knowledge of dance: such as the types of dance, prominent professionals, dancers or those involved in teaching, the role of dance in social life and if it was part of their school experience.

The data were analyzed descriptively, based on books and scientific articles in the area and founded on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

The results presented in the questionnaires provided information that allowed the development of some associations with Bourdieu's theoretical suppositions.

The sample used did not manifest great variability with regard to age group, demonstrating that 61% of the pre-college board students participating in the study were in the 17 year old age group, followed by 30.5% in the 16 year old age group.

An attempt was made to verify which dance styles the students knew. The responses presented a diversification in styles, like: forró, waltz, break, hip hop, street dance, axé, jazz and ballet, where the latter was the most remembered by students.

Reading these reports it is possible to call attention to what Bourdieu (1996) calls preference systems, where the author affirms the characteristics of knowledge are pertinent to the social and economic condition. Thus considered, we relate the social-economic level of the interviewees, inferring that *ballet*, considered a practice that is restricted to a large part of the population, is present in the everyday life of these students, establishing an individual or group position in styles of life.

This observed difference regarding closeness to certain dance styles was generated from certain material conditions of existence together with elements of group preferences compared to preferences of other groups in other positions. That, in turn, reproduces the

differences tied to the distribution structure of appropriation instruments, thus transformed into symbolic distinctions (BOURDIEU, 1998).

With regard to the proximity of pre-college board exam students to a professional dance area, not restricting the possibility of response to the teacher of the specific activity, 47.5% of the students affirmed knowing a professional, whether a teacher, dancer, choreographer, academy owner and people who practiced dance as a form of physical exercise. This presents a greater relationship with the universe of dance, favoring the acquisition of a specific capital culture, specifically about dance in relation to the others.

Making a reading of this evidence, it is pertinent to report what Bourdieu called social capital, since he understands this aspect as a durable network of more or less institutionalized relations, tied to a certain group, which is equipped with common properties and united by permanent ties, depending on the relationship network and the volume of capital (BOURDIEU, 1998).

The distinction of cultural capital related to dance, when the focus is gender, thus becomes even more evident. Most women (60%) respond positively to knowledge about dance professionals, whereas 65% of men reported not knowing any professional in the area.

This makes us suggest the possibility that social conditioning related to gender has favored women in the construction of a habitus, generally, associating dance to femininity (BOURDIEU, 1996). These results match what is exposed by Sanderson (2001) in a study on adolescents between 11 and 16 years of age. Study results demonstrated that women have more positive attitudes towards ballet than men. The author also cites Pollard (1988), who argues that adolescent men are insecure and not very willing to be associated with any activities that can be interpreted as feminine.

Analyzing the issue that investigates student knowledge about a dance professional with some prominent role in society, it was verified that less than half of the pre-college board exam students responded positively (42.4%). And of these, most were women (46.7%). Since the formulated question intended allow students to be completely open to pursue their possibilities of knowledge in relation to different aspects linked to dance, the answers were multiple and involved axé group dancers prominent in the media, teaching professionals and dance style shows, as well as artists and singers.

On the other hand, in a symbolic system, with the signs as a result of relations with other signs, that is, since its value is given by the position they occupy in the system, the lifestyle also means relations of association and dissociation in the stratification system. Thus, consumption forms or styles, for example of material arts or goods – fundamentally contribute towards knowledge of the meaning attributed by the groups to their actions and the group's social image (BOURDIEU, 1998).

An interesting point that allows us to advance in some analyses can be seen in relation to the fact that the most cited professionals are tied to dance styles, such as: ballroom, waltz, forró, samba and tango, contrary to a possible approximation with ballet, the most cited dance style.

In this case, we can suggest that the cultural capital of a certain social class is legitimized by another the moment it is the group's most recognized dance style; but to the contrary, the experienced reality is distant and associated with a relationship network with other distinct styles. According to Araújo (1997), adapted to a cultural context, and greatly imposed and broadcast in the cultural industry, the attraction of the adolescent by the language of movement only occurs within the scope of leisure. In the case of dance, we observe great rejection by formal and academic learning, precisely because it is not part of everyday activity.

Thus, in order to analyze the students' school experience, a question was addressed regarding curricular subjects that include some relation with dance in their content. It was found that 62.7% of the students did not have any contact with dance during their school experience. It was also observed that most answers (20%) were tied to Physical Education, followed by Art. Besides that, the most cited types of dance practiced by the students were: ballet, jazz, belly dancing and typical dances.

In a study conducted by Marcelino (2005) that verified the causes for the structure for practicing dance by children aged 9 to 12, participants in a sports program dance class, the author observed that the offer of the modality was one of the causes for the demand. The children practiced because they enjoyed dancing and because it was a pleasant activity. Besides that, it can be seen that children make diverse social uses of this practice, although not clearly verifying what causes the dispositions for dance.



In this study, we intended to verify experience of individuals with dance during their school experience and if this approach was done within the scope of school activities, in other words, as a part of the curriculum. As shown, we found that most individuals did not have the opportunity to practice dancing during school, which raises another question in relation to the limitation of dance in school, which is related to what was analyzed by Marcelino about product offer, which will generate consumer demand. According to Sanderson (2001), the paradox of high levels of recreational interest by adolescents in dance and the severe limit to opportunities offered in schools has received attention from researchers in literature.

What can be underscored in relation to the students experiences in school, and which presents a contribution in the acquisition of cultural capital about the future interest in dance, is that through the opportunity of knowledge it is possible to develop a liking, that is, there is an accumulation of cultural capital that generates a consumption interest at difference social levels.

#### **4 – Final Considerations**

Analyzing the questionnaire and student reports, it was possible to ascertain that there is a certain acquired cultural capital about dance. The analyses point to new reflections in this universe, because regardless of the specific dance style of each group, they were all tied to its universe. As an example, we can cite the diversity of rhythms and styles presented, and the knowledge that a large part of the students reported having about personalities that stand out in the dance environment.

It also became evident that there is a distinction in relation to proximity with dance, considering gender. This identified the possibility girls have, through a teaching system, to acquire a liking for the activity. This reveals the role of the school during the formation process of youths in the construction of cultural capital in dance. However, the pedagogical practiced developed in this environment reinforces values, experienced by all of society, that dance is an activity directed towards women.

We consider this a delay in relation to the dissemination of dance as a practice or consumption, which reinforces distorted values by the lack of understanding of elements of

the universe of dance. This can generate conflicts by considering doubt about the masculinity of a man who dances exacerbated eroticism attributed by media to semi-naked bodies exposed on television. The reinforcement of class distinction also becomes clear, considering the social-economic profile of the interviewees with the direction towards acquiring a taste for dance, where the styles are closer to those classes considered privileged, ballet and jazz.

We see dance as a manifestation of people's rights, regardless of color, religion, gender, social-economic power and other obstacles that can inhibit the democratization process. Dance represents the symbols and meanings of how social groups live. It is like inhibiting or removing the possibility of a person to feel emotions, express their feelings. Men and women are being stripped of the opportunity to enjoy the fullness of their lives, when they are impeded from experiencing the different sensations of dance.

This distancing from the habit of experiencing the universe of dance is a condition the dominating social structures have established in the people. Thus, there is a dance for men, for women, for children, for the elderly, for the poor and for the rich.

We believe it is possible to break some paradigms about dance and its relationship with society, and the learning institutions play an important role in this, where they can decide to continue perpetuating values that no longer have anything to do with our society, or agree to set out on new paths. This certainly brings us to the formation process of teachers who work in the area and the conditions they face in school reality. Although this has not been addressed in the text, we suggest it is a continuity of the study to consider the school teachers' perspective about dance, considering the teachers as a specific professional category that influences in the pedagogical context in the acquisition of values and a vision about dance's social role and that the youths perpetuate in current society.

### **As representações da dança: uma análise sociológica**

**Resumo:** A dança é uma forma de manifestação social que representa aspectos característicos de uma sociedade, podendo ser compreendida por diferentes aspectos de análise. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar a visão de alunos pré-vestibulandos sobre a dança. Os dados foram analisados descritivamente, fundamentando-se na abordagem sociológica de Pierre Bourdieu. Foi possível verificar que a dança é um capital cultural estabelecido por uma série de condições sociais de estruturas dominantes. Assim, diferentes características podem ser identificadas, nas danças do homem, da mulher, da criança, do velho, do pobre e a do rico.

**Palavras-chave:** Dança. Percepção social. Bourdieu.

### **Las representaciones de la danza: una análisis sociológica**

**Resumen:** La danza es una forma de manifestación social que representa aspectos específicos de una sociedad y se puede entender por los diferentes aspectos de análisis. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar el conocimiento de quien estaba a punto de ingresar en una universidad sobre la danza, El análisis descriptivo de los datos se realizó basado en el acercamiento social de Pierre Bourdieu. Fue posible entender que la danza es un capital cultural establecido por un equipo social, puesto a sus personas por las estructuras dominantes. Así, pueden identificarse las características diferentes entre las maneras informadas de danza relacionadas al hombre, mujer, niño, anciano, personas pobres y la danza de personas ricas.

**Palabras clave:** Baile. Percepción Social. Bourdieu.

### **REFERENCES**

ARAÚJO, M. V. B. A dança: laboratório multicultural relato de experiência. **Revista corporis**, Pernambuco - Recife, v.1, n. 1, p. 15-21, jan./dez. 1997.

BOURCIER, P. **História da dança no ocidente**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1987.

BOURDIEU, P. Deporte y clase social. *In*: BROHM, J.M. **Materiales de sociología del deporte**. Madri: Ediciones de la Piqueta, 1993. p.57-82.

BOURDIEU, P. **Razões Práticas**: sobre a teoria da ação. Campinas, SP: Papirus, 1996.

BOURDIEU, P. **O poder simbólico**. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 1998.

BOURDIEU, P. Esboço de uma teoria da prática. *In*: ORTIZ, R. (org.). **A Sociologia de Pierre Bourdieu**. São Paulo: Olho d'Água, 2003.

FERNANDES, C. **O corpo em movimento**. São Paulo: Annablume, 2002.

MARCELINO, D. R. As práticas corporais numa abordagem sociológica: o contexto da dança. **Motriz**, Rio Claro, v.11, n.1, p.S106, 2005. Supl.

NAVAS, C.; DIAS, L. **Dança Moderna**. São Paulo: Secretarias Municipais da Cultura, 1992.

OSSONA, P. **A educação pela dança**. São Paulo: Summus, 1988.

SANDERSON, P. Age and gender issues in adolescents attitudes to dance. **European physical education review**, Chester, v. 7, n. 2, p. 117-136, 2001.

SANTOS, E. S. A influência do balé clássico e da dança moderna nos estados de ânimo. 2001. 116 p. Dissertation (Master's in Human Motricity) – Biosciences Institute, State University of São Paulo Júlia de Mesquita Filho, Rio Claro - SP, 2001.

Received on: 3/30/2006

Approved on: 1/30/2008