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Visual Communication in Classical Ballet and Modern Dance: Convention vs. Invention

The dance discipline offers a variety of conventions as a visual discourse community. But what happens when these conventions are challenged between two genres of dance? Dance has many different genres; two, in particular, have been in constant battle with each other for the past 75 years. As modern dance has developed since the 1930s, classical ballet has been seen as modern's opposite. Modern dance was created as an opposition to ballet and goes against familiar patterns.

My analysis looks at the choreographic visions of Marius Petipa, the father of classical ballet, and Martha Graham, the mother of American modern dance. I will be discussing three conventions of dance: style, costumes/appearance, and training. My analysis will show how visual communication in dance is acquired and interpreted, and also how power relations play a role in this discourse community. I will explain what these genres communicate and how they communicate visually.

Style

Ballet and modern greatly differ in style; in fact, this is where most of the differences take place. For many centuries, ballet has been defined as graceful, elegant, and regal; in fact, ballet came out of the French courts of Louis XVI. The classical style of Marius Petipa's ballets, such as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, are still famous today because of their fairy tale stories. Classical ballet consists of many flowing arm movements, leg extensions, and dancing *en pointe* with the use of pointe shoes.

Early roles for ballerinas included princesses, swans, and fairies. In order for these parts to be believable, the dancers use steps to communicate their roles to the audience. For example,

in Swan Lake (ballet transparency) the dancers move in formations similar to how birds fly. Their arm movements also have bird-like qualities. The style of ballet can consist of long, smooth movements or short and light jumps. Overall, ballet style is very airy and light, which differs greatly from modern dance.

Modern dance, particularly Martha Graham's style, rebels against classical ballet conventions (modern transparency). Martha Graham was one of the greatest non-conformists in dance. She invented her own conventions. Graham introduced many elements that are the basis of modern dance. One element was the use of the torso and pelvis. In ballet, these parts are rarely emphasized, but Graham encouraged the side-to-side and harsh forward/backward motions of the torso and pelvis.

Another element Graham introduced was the use of the floor. Some ballerinas look down on modern dancers saying that all they do is roll around on the floor, but modern dancers use the floor for a reason. Modern dance is considered more real and earthy, so using the floor is a way for the dancer to connect with her surroundings. Also, modern dancers dance barefoot, another way of appearing more natural. The feet are not contained in shoes, making the movement free and more connected to the floor.

One other contribution by Graham was the reality of her dances. She used real emotions and storylines in her work such as love, death, the story of Joan of Arc, and Greek mythology. Graham wanted dance to be real, not about fairies or women who turn into swans. Her sacred mission in the dance world was to "chart the graph of the heart" through movement (Teachout 92). She wanted dance to express emotions and life.

Just by watching performances, or seeing pictures, the differences between ballet and modern dance styles are visibly apparent. Ballet is supposed to be beautiful and flawless,

whereas modern dance does not have to be. Modern dancers rebel more against ballet's principles when it comes to costumes and overall appearance.

Costume/Appearance

How these dancers look onstage communicates something completely different to the audience.

One visual difference is body type. Ballet puts so much stress on a dancer to be thin, to have long limbs, and high arches in the feet. Ballet has a very linear structure, so having the aforementioned attributes helps make the lines of the body and the movement visible. In modern dance, there is more freedom with movement; therefore, a dancer's body type can be more diverse. More muscular builds are acceptable. Graham had short legs in comparison to the rest of her body, and that had no effect on her success as a dancer, teacher, and choreographer.

Costumes also play a role in visual communication. The costumes help the audience interpret the dancer as the role in which they are dancing, to make their part believable. The classical ballet costume is the tutu, made up of a tight-fitting bodice with a short, stiff, tulle skirt. The tutu is usually adorned with sequins or jewels that add to the aesthetic quality of ballet. Headpieces, usually in a crown-type design, help accentuate the character being portrayed. The dancer's hair is always up and away from the face, giving the dancer a very pulled-together, streamlined look. Also, pointe shoes are worn to help the dancer onto her toes, to give herself an airy, weightless look.

Modern dancers do not really have a conventional costume. In its early days, the women wore longer dresses/skirts that did not really look like a costume. Modern costumes look plainer and more realistic of something you might wear everyday. Today, anything goes. I have seen modern dancers wear dresses, pants, and even bathing suits with matching swim caps. Again, modern dance defies the conformity of ballet and wants to remain free in every aspect of the art

form. Hair can be worn up, but usually hair is worn down to feel natural and free from bobby pins and clips.

Training

Petipa and Graham were both dancers, but Petipa preferred to choreograph. Graham just wanted to dance and ended up teaching. Many visual images are used to teach. If students are having difficulty with a step, teachers will give them visual images to think about. I remember one of my friends wanted to really use the space on stage, so she imagined the dance routine as a visual map. One common image used in ballet is to pretend you are wearing a diamond necklace. This image helps dancers open their chest to present themselves.

There are even visual forms of communication within a ballet class, not just a performance. For instance, when the entire class is asked to step on to the floor, usually the most advanced or confident dancers will stand in the front of the room. Also, principal dancers will actually claim their own space in the studio and it is considered to be extremely rude to dance in someone else's territory.

Modern dance training visually differs from ballet. Improvisation is a large part of modern training. Basically, to do improvisation is to just move with the music, if there is any, and do whatever movements come to mind at the time. You keep creating as you move; there are no limitations to improvisation. You feed off of what other dancers do, and then your collaboration can help you achieve new choreography and ideas. Dancers can imitate each other or create their own style. Group improvisation is a great exercise to enhance group communication in dance, but it also leaves room for individual creativity.

Visual images used by modern teachers have more to do with energy, such as to imagine your energy constantly spiraling up from your head towards the ceiling. Many new modern

dancers have trouble with choreography done on the floor. Sometimes, making contact with the floor can be difficult depending on how fast you need to rise or fall, and especially if the steps are more advanced. For dancers to become accustomed to floor work, instructors will give relaxation sessions and tell students to always be aware of the floor. The students are told to lie down, close their eyes, and feel the way their bones and muscles touch the floor. When a dancer needs to roll, fall, or sink slowly to the floor it can be intimidating because they can obviously get hurt if they are not careful. The ground needs to be visually pictured as something softer than it is. Quicksand is a popular example when the steps are slow and fluid. If dancers do a faster fall to the ground and then immediately need to get up, the floor is imagined to push them up so the energy of the dance is continuous.

Conclusion

So many dance companies today have expanded their repertoire because of dancers who challenged conventions. Dancers are trained in various genres, and ballet is seen as the stepping stone for all other genres: once you know ballet, you can be any kind of dancer. Over the last 20 years, ballet and modern have merged to make contemporary ballet. More and more ballets are becoming contemporary; fancy costumes are used less and storylines are more open to interpretation. As ballet and modern continue to reinvent themselves, shadows of Petipa and Martha Graham are still seen behind every dancer.