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PROCESSES OF PERCEPTION IN THREE DANCING BODIES*

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Dance shares with all art the primary impulse of human beings to play with form, as well as the characteristically human search for meaning in life. But, dance, like each of the arts, has particular properties. Because the movement of human bodies is its medium, dance crystallizes and (re)creates important and often ignored aspects of our shared cultural knowledge, knowledge realized in practices and behavior as well as in beliefs and concepts.

In thinking and writing about dance in a scholarly way, therefore, we need to resist the tendency to ignore the actual experiences involved in dancing. Analyses of social functions, symbolic systems, philosophical meanings, or political implications of dance are all useful and important, but in themselves form only partial accounts. The meanings and implications of dance, indeed, of

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all art, are embedded in the experiences of creating, learning, performing, and watching it.

With these thoughts in mind, I'd like to focus on how three dance forms affect the senses – our powers of perception – and thereby create meanings and social relationship. I do this not as a phenomenologist but as an anthropologist and dancer. I see the body/mind/person as being culturally constructed; I see dance as one major way in which we are stimulated and changed, and through which we may articulate, affect, and understand our lives. Thus I view the senses not as a fixed biological or psychological mechanisms but as dynamic processes shaped by and through the culture(s) in which we live.

I have chosen three kinds of contemporary dance as illustrations: ballet and contact improvisation, which I examine in their American settings, and traditional dance as currently practiced in Ghana, West Africa. Based on my research as a participant-observer in all three dance forms, I will suggest how each one tends to conceptualize and shape particular experiences of the senses and what implications about dance and culture emerge from such experiences. By focusing on the processes of perception, I hope to emphasize the conjunctions of the personal body with the social body, and of the choreography of dance with the choreography of social life.

BALLET: THE PRIMACY OF SEEING¹

Ballet has a tradition which dates back to the European courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the Renaissance, royalty presented dance as part of lavish political spectacles in which movement and bodily department were seen to constitute visible signs of moral states, political power, and divine association. Louis XIV's founding of the first dance academy in 1670 initiated a long process of technical development and professionalization of the court dance as a performance form; by the early nineteenth century (the romantic period), the vocabulary of the contemporary ballet can be clearly recognized. In romantic ballet, the former specific meanings of the movement had been nearly transformed into a more generalized signification of beauty and elegance, while the visual design of individual bodies in the stage space assumed primary importance. Today, ballet, as the premiere art dance form in America (as well as many other countries), represents ideals of exquisitely controlled technical precision and emotional expression combined within a classical (traditional) framework.

The ballet vocabulary consists of a number of positions of the feet and arms, shapes of the entire body, and movements with names describing their physical actions — *plie* (bend), *tombe* (fall), *glissade* (slide), *releve* (rise); these

discrete segments may be variously combined to produce choreographic sequences. These technical specifications meet the demands of ballet performance spaces, as ballet theoretician Lincoln Kirstein explains, “determin[ing] the greatest frontal legibility and launch of the upper body as silhouette framed in a proscenium” (1983: 240). Accordingly, the ballet student begins to dance by learning positions, shapes, and separate “steps”, all of which centrally concern space and its visual organization. The dance training emphasizes sight as the primary process of artistic conception and perception.

Since sometime in the nineteenth century, the mirror has played an everpresent partner to the ballet student and performer: ballet dancers practice by executing repetitive movement patterns while being watched by a teacher or choreographer and by watching their own reflected image². As a dancer moves, she or he carries a mental picture of the perfect performance of each step, comparing the mirrored image with the ideal. Consequently, for the dancer, the edges and lines of the body as perceived by a viewer become paramount.

For the ballet viewer, vision also predominates. The proscenium stage, the three-sided box in which events unfold, shines brightly in contrast to the darkened space in which the audience sits. In large theaters, spectators in the balconies may be at a great distance from the performers, so that they cannot hear the sound of the dancers’ footsteps and breathing (ballet dancers also strive to minimize these sounds), and their kinesthetic sensation of the movement may be greatly diminished. What always remains are the moving pictures, the extended lines which make the images visible from a distance.

Ballet choreography pays great attention to the spatial precision. Shifting lines and clusters of dancers constitute major organizing principles of its composition, and formations of symmetrical bodies create visual harmony and hierarchy which frame and set off solo performers. The *corps de ballet* members strive to look as much alike as possible and to move in perfect unison; individuals must control inclinations to curve an arm less or lift a leg higher than the group ideal or they will ruin the overall visual design and motion. In contrast, the soloist may, indeed should, cultivate an ability to perform movement that looks stylistically unique, and to phrase movement – to delay or hurry an action slightly – in order to create a visible shaping through time and to complement the music. Thus the soloist stands out by going beyond the basic pictorial unity of the ballet, playing at the edges of the strict boundaries to which the corps must adhere and enhancing visual design with individual variation and rhythmic intricacy.

While the sense of sight is not, of course, the sole mode of perception in ballet, it seems to organize all the other senses so as to tie them inextricably to the visual appearance of design in space. For example, most ballet choreography bears a close relationship to the rhythm and mood of the music, often providing a demonstration of the music, a graphic realization of what is

being heard. At the same time, the musicians producing the sound remain hidden in the orchestra pit so as not to disturb the stage picture. For both dancer and spectator, aural perception is cultivated in relation to visual perception.

The sense of touch also plays a significant role in ballet choreography, most prominently in the *pas-de-deux*, the duet of the male and female soloists. The sense of touch, as that of sound, is inseparable from sight for both dancer and spectator. What the touch looks like to a spectator always merits attention – physical interaction which carries emotional and dramatic metaphor remains technical as well and must, therefore, also create a visual design.

Finally, the kinesthetic sense of energy or force (the amount of effort needed to execute a movement), also bears close relationship to vision, one which contributes to the characteristic gendering of ballet movement. While all ballet dancers must cultivate considerable muscular strength and control, a man must generally appear to exert force strongly, a woman, lightly. Lifts demand the participation of both dancers, the woman in many cases jumping with great energy and holding the position of her body in the air as the man catches her and utilizes the momentum of her movement. Yet the ballerina looks as if she does very little, the lightness of her upper torso and arm motion in particular (as well as her slender body and her ability to balance on the point of her foot) conveying weightlessness, airiness. The *danseuse*, in contrast, appears solid, stable, either firmly connected to the floor or propelled from it by virtue of his own strength. Paradoxically (magically), in many classical *pas-de-deux* in particular, the nearly disembodied female provides the primary image of the dance, while the fully embodied male nearly disappears from sight³. As spectators, our eyes confirm the reality of the unreal, the fantastic disembodiment of the body.

I will return to the implications of the primacy of seeing in ballet. How practices of dance differently construct perception and link to cultural meaning becomes clearer, however, when more than one dance form is considered.

CONTACT IMPROVISATION: THE PRIMACY OF TOUCHING⁴

Contact improvisation began formally in 1972, when a group of experimental American modern dancers and college students began to cultivate the movement skills involved in two people catching each other and falling together. The form developed into a practice of moving while constantly touching, leaning on, lifting, balancing on, or supporting another person. Performed from its inception as an informal demonstration, contact improvisation has also been practised as a kind of social dance which people simply get together and do, by itself or sometimes in conjunction with other kinds of popular and/or improvisational dancing. Both contemporary American ballet and contact improvisation

draw a largely middle-class viewing audience, but ballet, a highly institutionalized performance form, involves many more people than contact improvisation as both performers and spectators and holds a privileged position in the mainstream of American art dance.

Practitioners of contact improvisation have explicitly conceived of what they do as an alternative dance activity and, in many cases, as a kind of political statement. The sense of touch, which guides the dancing, assumes the importance both technically and symbolically for teachers, students, performers and spectators. Awareness of touching a partner and following “the point of contact” provides the impetus for movement, which adheres to no preset pattern and relies on a general vocabulary of falling and rolling varying from one individual to another. Touch joins the two dancers, attuning them to each other’s weight and momentum as they move.

Students often begin to learn contact improvisation by lying on the floor and closing their eyes, shutting off the stimulus of sight and thereby focusing more attentively on the skin of the whole body. Teachers instruct students to investigate simple movements for long periods of time, suggesting that they sense, feel, experience, notice, and give in to the changing patterns of their own body on the floor. These patterns do not concern the shape of the body as perceived by a spectator (as in ballet), but rather have to do with the performer’s perception of touch, and, through that touch, the perception of weight and momentum.

People learn to partner in contact improvisation by practising different touching and weight-bearing patterns. While some specific catches or lifts may be taught, longer improvisations based on simple movement ideas – rising and falling, or dancing with heads constantly touching – predominate. Almost all classes, including those with beginners in them, include “open dancing”, in which people do whatever they can and wish to do within the structure of staying in contact. Teachers often dance with students throughout the class, helping students when they practise technical ideas and sometime offering more general commentary about their improvisations. Unlike most American dance techniques, however, the teacher acts more as a guide for a certain kind of experience than as the primary purveyor of knowledge in the class, a condition which contributes to the emphasis on internal experience rather than external appearance.

Also, no ideal physical type for contact improvisation exists, nor is there a single physical prerequisite for skilled performance. This has encouraged people of different body types and backgrounds to participate and to consider themselves dancers⁵.

For the dancer, the body’s edges seem to change and to melt with one’s partner; likewise, the sense of weight shifts in response to the partner’s movement and the movement itself seems generated by and through the points of contact. Emphasis on touch, weight, and momentum supersede attention to visual design

of movement, rhythmic control, or choreographic sequencing. In social settings, the connection of one's self and one's partner in contact tends to be the sole focus, while in performing situations, awareness of the audience and choreographic considerations may become part of the dancing. Also, skilled contact improvisers, like skilled ballet dancers, have the ability to stretch the form beyond its most simple defining boundaries and may call attention to spatial design, rhythm, or sequencing in their movement, as well as to touch and weight⁶.

The viewers of contact improvisation perceive the dancing as less presentationally directed than ballet. Most performances occur in small spaces with the audience in close proximity to the dancers, so that the audience is invited by this setting and by the emphases of the movement to concentrate on the unification of people through physical contact and interaction (rather than through unison movement – the replication of visual design and exact rhythms). Dancers' noises – breathing, grunting, the sound of falling or catching someone – are clearly audible. The spectators' perception of dancers using weight and momentum encourages them to identify physically and kinesthetically with the dancers. Because performers either dance in silence, or tend to use music as general ambience rather than as rhythmic definition or complement, spectators perceive the rhythm of movement phrases largely through identification with the dancers' impulses. Thus, as the movement structure of ballet stimulates the dancer to visualize herself, and the spectator to admire visual design and musical visualization, so the movement structure of contact improvisation stimulates the dancer to sense herself in mutual motion with a partner, and the spectator to identify with the sensual, proprioceptive experiences of the dancers.

The use of the skin as sensory indicator influences not only the dancer's perception of body and self but also the relative importance of aspects of the body as perceived by the audience. The conventions of touch in contact improvisation differ dramatically from those in ballet. First, any parts of the body may be touched without an accompanying signification; the conventions of the dance form do not assign particular meanings to particular body parts. Only those contact improvisers who wish to draw out the expressive or dramatic connotations of physical encounter deliberately utilize hand gesture or eye focus. The structure of contact improvisation thus reconstitutes the body differently from everyday social interaction as well as from many other American dance forms.

Second, the contact improvisation duet may be danced by two women or two men, as well as a man and a woman, contributing to an avoidance of gendered attributes in movement. Within the dance, any person may support or be supported by another, regardless of size or sex, so that many kinds of gender configurations and relationships may be implied or interpreted. Use of force varies according to individual dancers and the particular moment in the sequence of movement – gender does not prescribe styles or roles. The mutual experience of

touch thus creates the central impetus for dancing, felt directly by the performers and vicariously by the spectators.

The third dance form I wish to consider belongs to a culture different from that which has embraced ballet and given rise to contact improvisation. Ghanaian dance provides an ethnological comparison which helps to clarify further how perceptions may be differently shaped in cultural circumstances.

TRADITIONAL GHANAIAN DANCE: THE PRIMACY OF HEARING⁷

The fifty-eight ethnic groups which officially comprise the country of Ghana encompass a variety of dance and music traditions. Most Ghanaians learn the dancing of their own village and often those of neighboring villages, or, if living in a city, learn the traditional dances of their family, neighbors, and friends. Within the traditional performances, dances cannot be separated from musical structures, in particular, from drumming patterns. The rhythmic interrelationship of different drums with each other, and with the movement of dancers and spectators, constitutes the aesthetic and symbolic core of the event.

In Ghana, a good dancer is first and foremost one who listens and responds, communicating with the music. No one shows a dance step in silence – it only exists as part of a larger pattern of sound and silence, movement and stillness. Instructors admonish young dancers to “say the drums in your mouth” and to know all of the rhythms, so that they may understand their relationship to the whole. Thus individual variation is supposed to emerge in response to dance partners and to music, with full awareness of how one fits into the larger event. “Self-expression” does not appropriately describe these individual statements, because they are explicitly musical-choreographic in nature, shaped so as to enhance the entire performance. The experience of dancing and playing realizes and creates social values: flexibility within clear formal structures, participation by everyone, attentiveness of each individual to the group, maintenance of a sense of overall balance.

A Ghanaian dance and the music to which it is performed share the same name. Each particular piece consists of sets of movements, and of bell and drum patterns which have a particular rhythmic relationship to each other but are played in differing meters. Characteristically, the drum parts retain their pattern vis a vis the bell part but do not sound in unison with it or with other drums, except on isolated beats. Rather, they engage in what John Chernoff calls “apart playing”, holding one pattern as cross-rhythm to another and all together creating a polymetered music.

The complex accumulated rhythm repeats again and again, augmented and embellished by the improvisations of the master drummer and the dancers.

At signs from either the master drummer or a lead dancer, the musicians shift to a new pattern. Dancers may perform certain steps to each pattern, creating appropriate variations in response to the music and to other dancers. Each spectators is also expected to participate by moving some part(s) of the body in a rhythm that complements those of the musicians and dancers.

When the dancers are not improvising variations, they dance in rhythmic unison with each other, matching their movement impulses to those of a drumming pattern. However, while dancers may appear unified, they seldom produce an exact spatial unison because the emphasis of their movement lies in rhythmic, dynamic action rather than on achievement of a shape or line, as in ballet. Within the general framework of a step, one may let an arm swing slightly higher or lower or emphasize a movement more or less percussively – in other words, one may improvise subtly within a tight rhythmic and spatial framework. A dancer who solos does so at the invitation of others (the rest of the dancers may stop and watch, or the master drummer may call a dancer to perform). He or she (or, in some case, a couple) dances in the service of the group, playing with variations in response to the group's encouragement. Thus, choreography becomes shaped by the rhythmic interaction of many people, rather than by a choreographer's vision (as in ballet), or by the mutual momentum with a partner's touch (as in contact improvisation).

It is said that a child learns to dance in its mother's womb, hearing and feeling drumming rhythms before it is born. Children learn dance and music by watching, listening and imitating. A more or less skilled dancer will develop depending on a child's access to traditional dance and on a family's encouragement, the child's individual talents, and so forth. However, the general level of dancing and musical ability in Ghana ranks very high in comparison with the general level among most populations in the United States, for instance. Virtually everyone in Ghana expects to participate in dance at a variety of events. Thus, a continuum exists between everyday dance and special performance, and between everyone who dances and those who are especially skilled.

As with contact improvisation, one qualifies to participate in Ghanaian dance (and, indeed, is expected to do so) by being willing to participate, and at social events and ceremonies, people of all ages and sizes dance. While some dances require athleticism or belong to a specific age group, many do not, and older people may be recognized, without condescension, as skilled and subtle performers. Also, those dances associated with specific social occasions and historical traditions often require gender roles. These usually display movement qualities felt to be characteristic of a social action – quick, slashing gestures and percussive accents in a men's war dance, for instance. In many group dances and male-female partner dances, however, everyone does the same movement, that

is, movement within the same rhythmic and spatial parameters varied according to each individual's style, regardless of gender.

As in the other dance forms I have discussed, perception never remains confined to a single orientation when discerning valued qualities and skills; a good Ghanaian dancer above all keeps the beat, but also appears visually harmonious, "cool" even in moments of great complexity or rapid motion. It has been my experience that American audiences tend to react with excitement and enthusiasm to the most visually athletic and exuberant aspects of West African dance (and I suspect that companies on tour insure an abundance of such dancing in order to communicate with their audiences). However, the Ghanaian dancers and musicians I have known tend to admire subtlety and finesse, appreciating understatement, responding to what gets left out or implied. While connoisseurs of any dance form better understand its subtleties than do new audiences, the value of understatement or omission in Ghanaian dance also reflects the perception shaped by the structures of the dance and music (a music which may be "best considered as an arrangement of gaps, where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound" [Chernoff 1979:113-114]).

The close relationship of Ghanaian music and dance may seem similar to the interdependence of the two arts in ballet. However, the nature of the interdependence in fact differs because the structures of the music and choreography differ. The various instrumental and vocal parts in Western classical music join in synchrony within a single meter at a time, and sometimes even within unison rhythm patterns. In like manner, ballet choreography creates frequent points of conjunction with melodic and rhythmic phrases, often matching them in unison, each note with accompanying movement⁸. While a good dancer in Ghana must feel his or her own rhythmic pattern at all times, what matters is not *synchrony* with other patterns but the steady *relationship* with them. By dancing one among many independent patterns, the dancer becomes another part of the rhythmic dialogue of participants, holding his or her own among the competing countermeters (Thompson 1974:16).

The focus on listening in traditional Ghanaian dance shifts attention to social relationship among dancers, musicians, and viewers, and to the ceremonial occasion in which the dance occurs. As with contact improvisation, a sense of group participation prevails. However, whereas contact improvisers generate the dance through touch, the physical interaction of two or more bodies, Ghanaian dancers join with the musicians to mutually generate dance and music, listening to the rhythms and responding, seeing the rhythms and playing. The sense of hearing shapes the body itself as a social ceremonial instrument, through which dancers and spectators simultaneously perceive and participate in the event.

PROCESSES OF PERCEPTION AND DANCING BODIES

Even the brief descriptions of dancing offered above indicate patterns and processes of organizing perception in which dancers, teachers, and spectators participate. These perceptions are not just cognitive; they involve both emotional and kinesthetic knowledge. Nor, on the other hand, are such understandings merely natural or intuitive; they are shaped in every aspect by artistic-social ideas and practices.

Ballet practice and performers hone visual sensibility, giving the dancer an acute awareness of the body's precise placement and shaping in space, and demonstrating to the spectator the remarkable possibilities of bodily design and the architecture of moving people in space and time. Ballet choreography shapes actions designated as highly athletic and emotional, encouraging a dancer to feel both mastery over the body and expression through it. Performers learn to see themselves "from the outside", even as they "express" themselves "from the inside", and audiences learn to comprehend the codes of gender and touch which the movement signifies.

The visual priorities of ballet can be seen to complement what Johannes Fabian has called the "visualism" of western philosophy (and anthropology), a tendency to fix phenomena in space and time, to gravitate toward the "pictorial-aesthetic" (1987: 107). The objectification of the body as an instrument to be mastered also fits familiar American patterns in medicine and sport, as well as dance. Performers and spectators learn from the dance that technique and expression constitute separate capacities which, in ideal circumstances, may be joined. At the same time, the perception of athleticism and expression joined creates dilemmas for male dancers, given the American association of expression through the body with the feminine. Women confront other associations: the dual representation of embodiment and disembodiment by the female performer provides a powerful example of ambiguity in female social images and roles.

Contact improvisation offers an almost opposite set of experiences, yet, as an oppositional practice, it engages some of the same cultural patterns as does ballet. In order to shift focus from the visual, beginning dancers close their eyes. When they dance, the body, as in ballet, remains the focus, but rather than being objectified as viewed from the outside, the body becomes the subject of experience from the inside. The practice of contact improvisation creates a sensitivity to touch and to inner sensation (as opposed to inner expression of ballet), and the sense of self becomes located in the body, as people experience the contact duet as a dialogue with another person through the skin. The viewer learns to identify with the kinesthetic reflexes and dynamic momentum of the dancers.

Contact improvisation exemplifies physical practices formed as alternatives to dominant cultural emphases on visualism, differentiation of gender, and the use of bodies in the service of art. The parameters of the dancing emphasize an egalitarianism of roles and the ability of each individual to move idiosyncratically yet in concert with others. Explicit structures and control have little place in this dance form; hence the perceptual training, which focuses on “feeling free”, “letting go”, and the experience of self and others, differs greatly from that of ballet.

For the Ghanaian dancer, the body, so prevalent in discussions of training and in the critical literature about American dance forms, does not predominate. Ghanaian dance seems not to posit a theory of “the body”; rather, movement by dancers and drummers creates the patterns of sight and sound which altogether constitute the event. The individual makes no sense outside of the relationship to the whole so that movement takes on socially communicative, rather than personally expressive, associations.

The practice and performance of Ghanaian dance seems consonant with an assumption of mind/body/spirit/society as interconnected and not separable, and with a society in which artistry is not the opposite of utility. A person dances, enacting a social role as male or female, of a certain age, status, ancestry, and so on. Individuality as defined by relationship becomes cultivated in the social experience of the dance. Its parameters encourage a balance of control and variation, and sense of participation by all, as viewers are expected to add their rhythms to the dance.

What I have been discussing is *one aspect* of how dance creates meaning, an important aspect which may be overlooked as we attempt to translate dance experiences in to written language. Certainly, it must be noted that spectators may exercise all perceptual senses in experiencing any kind of dancing. Nor in any case does one perceptual process determine a dance form – teachers of Ghanaian dance will correct a student's movement, just as ballet teachers instruct pupils about rhythm, and contact improvisation teachers help students to find body positions in which weight can be taken. Nor do dance forms stay fixed, either in their actual execution or in their meanings for different audiences in different situations.

Yet, what I am proposing is that the particular characteristics of each dance form encourage priorities of sensation and subtly shape the nature of perception itself, finely tuning sensibilities in particular ways and helping to shape the practices and behaviors, beliefs and ideas, of our lives. the structural and dynamic properties of a dance form may also make that form more amenable to certain kinds of meaningful associations, not dictating or fixing meaning, but clearly contributing to it. At certain historical moments, then, conjunctions

between kinesthetic or choreographic properties and social meanings may render a dance form particularly powerful.

This discussion suggests additional questions about the transmission and transformation of dance from one cultural setting to another, as well as from one historical period to another. The changes in dancing must be variously located, with differences in movement and choreography seen in relation to teaching practices, performance settings, and aesthetic-philosophical beliefs. What do these changes indicate about the mutability of the body? How malleable are our perceptual processes, and what effect might exposure to different dance experiences have on our social perspectives? Certainly the possible variations in our dancing and dance watching suggest a fascinating potential for range and flexibility in our perceptions and our understanding.

Notes

¹ My analyses of ballet relies on over thirty years involvement, first as student, amateur performer, and teacher, then as dance historian and anthropologist.

² Jerome Robbins's ballet "Afternoon of a Faun" (1953), literally identifies the mirror with the audience by situating a narcissistic dancer in a studio, "watching" himself in the mirror of the proscenium opening.

³ The classical *pas-de-deux* bears an ironic resemblance to the Japanese *bunraku* puppet theatre, in which the fully visible puppeteers sink into the background and one's attention is held by the vitality of the puppet which they maneuver. Of course, the ballerina, who may appear to be maneuvered, is not a puppet, but a fully participating agent in her own movement.

⁴ My study of contact improvisation occurred over a ten year period beginning in 1980. See Novack (1990) for an account of that research.

⁵ It is probably fair to say that the athleticism of the form favors younger people, although, theoretically, older dancers could practice contact improvisation and modify their movement according to whatever physical capacity they felt they had. In fact, contact improvisation has been practiced by some older dancers and also by people with disabilities.

⁶ Even in performance, however, more skilled dancers are rarely singled out from the group in any way; dancers maintain the egalitarian conception of the form by structuring a concert so as to give "equal time" to each performer.

⁷ I began my study of Ghanaian dance in 1975, during a period of residence with the Ghana Dance Ensemble at the University of Ghana in Legon, and continued studying through 1978 with Ghanaian teachers at the State University of New York at Brockport. Having acknowledged my ballet and contact improvisation teachers elsewhere, I take this opportunity to offer my grateful thanks to my teachers of Ghanaian dance and music: Professor Albert M. Opoku, Edna Mensah, and Gideon Folie Alorwoyie.

⁸ When poorly done, dancers call this practice “Mickey Mousing” — moving like a cartoon character in pantomimic music visualization. When well done, the effect evokes great admiration. Igor Stravinsky claimed that he better understood his own music when George Balanchine, a choreographer acclaimed for his musicality, visually realized Stravinsky’s scores.

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