
A Sense of Choreology: In Search of a Distinctive Scholarly Approach to Dance



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Abstract: The paper addresses choreology as a scholarly discipline interpreting dance from different perspectives, but always with the intention to deal with dance in its movement qualities and constitutive principles. Three research fields are taken into consideration as being the “domains” of author’s academic scope. These are: historical study, illustrated by the issue of reading critical reviews as verbal expressions of movement perception; dance analysis and the problem of creating dance-relevant analytical categories; and the sociology of dance, focusing on dance as a unique, irreplaceable case of social action. All three cases should serve to demonstrate the possibility and ability to fulfil the premise inspired by Theodor Adorno: to make choreology meaningful, it must formulate its knowledge on the basis of characteristics identified inside the dance itself.

Keywords: Choreology; dance; Czech lands; dance analysis; sociology of dance

Introduction: Questioning the existence of choreology as an autonomous scholarly discipline

A scholarly approach to dance suffers from many discrepancies and “childhood complaints”, caused by the historical disadvantages of dance within Western culture, its late and fragmented development, lack of institutional structures, and so on. This is still the case today. The experience of dance scholars from all over Europe testifies to the marginalisation and uncertainty of their field, which is often dependent on the personal commitment and professional authority of individuals. The continuity of university positions, for example, is not guaranteed: these can be easily cancelled by a decision from above, regardless of the scholarly results of their representatives.¹ From the perspective of post-industrial society, the field of choreology seems too small, specialised, and isolated, in addition to being unnecessary and economically wasteful. From the point of view of the concept of interdisciplinarity, pervading the humanities today, choreology may seem a bit of a relic, and the defence of the meaning of its separate existence as foolishness. In this paper, I would like to address mainly the issue of the existence/non-existence of some cohesive academic discipline overarching all forms of dance, focused on dance itself and its intrinsic characteristics and features. The core question might be the sense of such discipline.

Dance research, at least in the Czech lands, while slowly establishing itself, has tended to be divided into several branches, which seldom communicate with each other. One branch was focused on ballet and its history. This history was mostly self-centred, with some relation to musicology and theatre studies, but with a weak link to history as such. In certain relation to this line, practical dramaturgy and ballet criticism were established, albeit lacking solid theoretical and analytical foundations. Another branch, studying the history of modern dance/Ausdruckstanz as a component of the avant-garde artistic movement, only started to develop in the years of my university studies, after being previously omitted owing to ideological biases. Ethnochoreology deals with folk/popular and national dances, usually in relation to ethnology (ethnography) and other humanities but often apart from “theatrical” dance research. Even though, in recent decades, dance-focused scholarly disciplines have made noticeable “progress”, the existence of a shared discipline is still uncertain and insecure. There are doubts about the necessity and usefulness of such a “dance science”, not only from scholars in allied disciplines but even from dance scholars and the dance community as a whole. These doubts (sometimes verging on contempt) are mainly directed at the supposed absence of specific research questions and methodological approaches distinctive to

¹ These issues were, for example, discussed during the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology symposium in Brežice (Slovenia, 2022) within the framework of the programme theme “Reconsidering knowledge production in dance research”.

dance and the provision of unique knowledge, inaccessible to other disciplines. The following considerations are meant as an attempt to formulate some thesis supporting my personal belief that choreology should exist as a scholarly discipline dedicated to dance in its all forms, in parallel with musicology or theatre studies. This is not a totally new idea, of course, rather its concretisation rooted in my personal experience and the Czech scholarly tradition.²

Personal research outset

The community of dance scholars is still a small one, even in the global context. Personal knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and understanding of the field of activity are projected directly into the disciplines, visible and influential in their overall picture. Because of the relatively limited coverage of dance topics by systematic research and the remaining “blank spots” in our knowledge, the dance scholar often works on themes never touched by other researchers. They take responsibility for discussing the issue and for choosing critical attitudes and interpretations. The dance scholar is free, but somehow lonely too. Our personal histories, the paths leading us to our individual specialisations, the conceptualisation of our research activities – all are worthy of attention. The reflection of the individual actions of each dance scholar can contribute remarkably to the reflection of the discipline in its entirety, to its delineation. Through this process, I hope we can answer the question of whether a specific, uniquely structured dance research attitude really exists. Thus, my personal scholarly history can be used to explain the way I construct my concept of choreology.

Three pillars of “my” choreology

I entered the “realm” of dance research having acquired various kinds of dance experience: classical dance; the Czech variant of Isadora Duncan’s legacy; two versions of the specific Ausdruckstanz method of the Czech dancer Jarmila Kröschlová, as mediated by her disciples; the folk-dance revival movement, influenced by interwar avant-garde modernistic theatre and the new artistic tendencies of 1960s; and so-called

² Already, in the first half of the 20th century, the Austrian scholar Victor Junk made an attempt to formulate a vision of “Tanzwissenschaft”, consisting of a set of subdisciplines, such as sociology of dance, dance aesthetics, dance psychology, and so on. See Victor Junk, *Grundlegung der Tanzwissenschaft*, ed. Elisabeth Wamlek-Junk (Hildesheim: Olms, 1990). In the late 1990s, an overview of existing scholarly approaches to dance was published in the entry “Methodologies in the study of dance”, included in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen; it consists of subentries on sociology, cultural context, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, and new areas of inquiry. See Selma Jeanne Cohen and Dance Perspectives Foundation (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Dance: A Project of Dance Perspectives Foundation, Inc., Volume 4 [Keil–Nove]* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 360–379. There are a number of texts dealing with particular dance research fields too.

jazz dance, as a specific “theatrical” dance style developed in Czechia in the 1960s.³ I attended several dance departments of leisure artistic schools⁴ and was a member of the exceptional folklore group Chorea Bohemica.⁵ During my further studies I gained more practical dance experience (classical dance, Rosalia Chladek method, folk dance, etc.). I was less active in social dancing and almost did not encounter disco dancing and similar styles.

I started my academic studies in the Dance Department of the Music Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1985, after finishing gymnasium, a secondary school providing general education. The programme dealing with dance research was then called Dance Theory. The founder of the Dance Department and creator of the theoretical programme, Jan Reimoser, conceptualised the field on the basis of dramaturgy, criticism, and librettistics, his own areas of interest, still often considered the essential and most legitimate form of the discipline by the dance public. In the years of my studies, the programme concentrated on history of ballet, the main research field of our professor, Božena Brodská, the only full-time lecturer at that time.⁶ She was the first scholar to conduct systematic research on the history of ballet in the Czech lands, starting from the 19th century and eventually covering the period from the 18th century to the mid-20th century. She gathered an admirable quantity of historical facts, placing our “national” ballet history into the European context, too. Her knowledge of the sources relevant for dance research was extremely wide-ranging, as was the quantity of notes and excerpts she collected even on topics outside her direct area of interest. She achieved all this despite having limited access to resources in the West.⁷ Thus, thanks to her, my first

³ The context of these dance styles, and the situation of amateur dance movements in the Czech lands in the post-war period, is covered in Dorota Gremlicová, Jiří Lössl, and Elvira Němečková, *Tanec jako záliba. Amatérské soubory scénického tance v českých zemích druhé poloviny 20. století* (Praha: NIPOS, 2021); and Daniela Stavělová et al., *Tíha a beztíže folkloru. Folklorní hnutí druhé poloviny 20. století v českých zemích* (Praha: Academia, 2021).

⁴ *Lidová škola umění* (people’s artistic school), today *Základní umělecká škola* (basic artistic school), a network of state schools providing education in artistic disciplines for children and young people as a leisure activity.

⁵ The group had a specific position in the Czech amateur folklore revival movement, being situated on the edge of so-called scenic dance, based on the legacy of *Ausdruckstanz* and staged folk dance productions. Its exceptional artistic value, inspired by avant-garde theatre and *Ausdruckstanz*, stemmed from original renditions of folk dances and music and quite contemporary expression. See Stavělová et al., *Tíha a beztíže folkloru*; see also Viktor Bezdiček (ed.), *Alena Skálová – fenomén choreografie* (Jinočany: H&H, 2006).

⁶ Martin Franc et al., *Dějiny Akademie múzických umění v Praze* (Praha: NAMU, 2017); Martin Franc and Lenka Krátká, *Dějiny AMU ve vyprávěních* (Praha: NAMU, 2017).

⁷ See the chapter dedicated to Božena Brodská in Lucie Čepcová and Vilém Faltýnek (eds), *(O)hlasý žen v české kultuře: ženy v pohybu: Božena Brodská, Zdenka Kratochvílová, Eva Kröschlová, Hana Machová, Jiřina Šlezingrová, Inka Vostřezová* (Praha: Institut umění – Divadelní ústav, 2020), 14–41. There is a bibliographic summary of her publications in Helen Kazárová (ed.), *Tanec a balet v Čechách, Čechy v tanci a baletu* (Praha: Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2016), 103–109.

research experience was focused on history and the study of sources, in a positivistic, descriptive conception, but based on deep dance-oriented knowledge and influenced by her researcher role model and intense personal interest in the subject.

During my university studies, I missed in the curriculum some theoretical dance disciplines, and given the focus on dance history, a detailed general introduction to historiography and its methods. Later, I was able to make up for these gaps thanks to inspiration from ethnography (through an informal study of the subject at Charles University), musicology (mediated by my father and brother, both involved in this field), cultural and dance anthropology (mainly through my colleague Daniela Stavělová), contemporary historiographical methodologies and schools, etc. In the end, I found two other disciplines, or better attitudes, to complete my personal research profile. For insight into dance and its inner arrangement, dance analysis provided me with the tools and theoretical concepts. The search for analytical approaches and their meaningful application to the study of dance became one of the main interests in my pedagogical activity.⁸ It was linked also to Kinetography Laban (Labanotation) and its theoretical grounding, contributing significantly to my understanding of the movement qualities and logic of dance and providing a valuable basis for dance analysis.⁹ My conceptualisation of the relations between dance and external cultural/social contexts was shaped by sociology, together with dance anthropology, cultural history, and historiography.¹⁰ The essential inspiration and support for the sociological approach was the sociology of music, not only the study of (musical) institutions and organisations but also the sociological aspects of the language (speech) of music itself.¹¹

Case study: The modern human body in dance

The first great topic of my historical study was the dance life of the so-called Deutschtöhmchen, citizens of the Czech lands of German nationality, and specifically their dance activities in Prague between the wars in the Neues deutsches Theater (New German Theatre) and in the frame of modernistic Ausdruckstanz schools and

⁸ Currently, the basis of dance analysis is provided for me by the frame created by Janet Adshead and her colleagues, and by that formulated by Anca Giurchescu and Eva Kröschlová. See Janet Adshead, (ed.), *Dance Analysis. Theory and Practice* (London: Dance Books, 1988); Anca Giurchescu and Eva Kröschlová, "Theory and Method of Dance Form Analysis", in *Dance Structures: Perspectives on the Analysis of Human Movement*, eds. Adrienne Lois Kaepler and Elsie Ivancich Dunin, 21–52 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007).

⁹ I became familiar with Kinetography Laban thanks to Professor Roderyk Lange, the Polish ethnochoreologist and dance anthropologist, a disciple of Albrecht Knust and keeper of his kinetographic archive, who organised intensive Kinetography seminars in the Instytut choreologii in Poznań, Poland.

¹⁰ I used this sociologically based approach in my dissertation. See Dorota Gremlicová, *Sociální funkce tance v moderní době: menuet kontra valčík* (Praha: Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2004).

¹¹ Mikuláš Bek, *Vybrané problémy hudební sociologie* (Olomouc: Vydavatelství Univerzity Palackého, 1993).

performers/groups, both locally and from other German-speaking countries.¹² After finishing a descriptive book on the topic (covering the period from the last third of the 19th century to 1938),¹³ the research material I had collected became an inexhaustible source for subsequent considerations and interpretations, based on applying various analytical, theoretical, and methodological approaches. Although my initial attitude was quite positivistic, focused on collecting facts about people, events, and creations, my attention was from the beginning attracted also by issues hidden under the surface, especially the relations between movement qualities and characteristics and their specific, immanent meanings reflected in perception. Later, the methods of dance analysis and (dance) sociology provided me with the scholarly equipment to formulate some considerations on these issues.

The combination of historical, analytical, and sociological approaches, when applied to the study of this material, can be demonstrated by using the example of the “Dance of Death” from Kurt Jooss’s well-known creation *The Green Table* (1932).¹⁴ Reviewers and dancers in the Czech lands reflected on the choreography on two main occasions: in 1932, in connection with the victory of the work in the choreographic competition in Paris; and in 1937, in the context of a series of guest performances by the Ballets Jooss in Prague. The sources available for consideration are mainly written (reviews in newspapers and journals), reflecting the creation and the character of Death from various perspectives, with emphasis on its ideological/intellectual message and the complex choreographic rendering, supported by masterly interpretation.¹⁵ The authors of these published reflections were dance reviewers such as Emanuel Siblík, Jan Rey (Reimoser), Věra Petříková, and Niké Honsová; choreographers such as Joe Jenčík; and theatre and music reviewers or writers, such as Miloš Hlávka, belonging to the Prague avant-garde artistic circle. Among them was the German writer Max Brod, who commented on Jooss’s unique movement conception of Death – energetic, flashy, powerful, paradoxically animate, surprisingly different from more usual theatrical depiction of Death as the “Grim Reaper”, the skeletal swordsman with a foil. Brod even captured Death’s ambiguous movement character: the steam-hammer-like legs trample everything and yet the arms can hold with captivating softness.¹⁶ This description seems to fit exactly the opening motif

¹² Dorota Beková, *Německá taneční kultura v Praze 1918–1939* (Praha: HAMU, 1989). Diploma work.

¹³ Dorota Gremlicová, *Taneční umění na scénách Nového německého divadla v Praze / Die Tanzkunst am Neuen deutschen Theater Prag (1888–1938)* (Praha: Státní opera Praha; Taneční listy, 2002).

¹⁴ This section is based on an unpublished paper by the author, “Dancing Death: The Critical and Choreographic Perception of Kurt Jooss’s *The Green Table* in Prague in 1930”.

¹⁵ The interpreter was then Rudolf Pescht, not Kurt Jooss as originally, but his rendering of the character was highly regarded in Prague.

¹⁶ “All das wird in der Regie von Kurt Jooss zu packender Eigenartigkeit gestaltet. Musik hämmert wie rasend, das grüne Scheinwerferlicht läßt den Verwesungsfleck über die Szene wandern, die Rudolf Pescht

of Death's solo: in three 4/4 bars, it does three-times four regular, heavy machine-like steps in deep plié sideways and two movement sequences of the arms, "scything" – an accentuated swinging movement approximately along the oblique axis – directed from high right to low left with the slower return to the starting position, lasting six beats each. The resulting movement unit is polyrhythmic, polydynamic, and polykinetic in its nature. It combines a soldierly, mechanical, energetic, dynamically stable quality with a freer one changeable in dynamic intensity and speed. The body is divided into relatively independent upper and lower parts, moving in different directions. It is both controlled, organized, mechanical body and a free, living one.¹⁷

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman formulated the concept of the modern body as athletic, strong, controlled, disciplined for work and war, as manifested clearly in modern sports.¹⁸ This characteristic partly fits the Ausdruckstanz and, equally, the movement pattern of Jooss's Death (lower body part), as described above. Another characteristic feature of the ambiguous nature of the Ausdruckstanz lies in the ideas of freedom, of the body liberated from limits and conventions, whether physical, ethical, or social, as formulated in the artistic programmes of the movement. This is close to Death's second kinetic pattern, based on dynamic accent and acceleration-deceleration. The hesitation, the oscillation between regularity and irregularity, control and freedom, collective discipline and individual liberty, can be considered as the fundamental physical, kinetic experience of modern man. These two potentially competing symbolic concepts – the liberated body of the Ausdruckstanz and the disciplined body of the citizen of the modern state – shared certain features, specifically the accents on vitality, power, and control, unifying their antagonistic effects. Consequently, the response of contemporary reviewers and writers to Jooss's *The Green Table* and the "Dance of Death" can be interpreted through the work's symbolic resonance with their everyday experience of the modern body, torn between contradictory expectations.

dirigiert. Man möchte glauben, daß neben den Reinhardtschen Tod im Salzburger 'Jedermann'-Spiele keine andere szenische Verkörperung als die des asketisch mageren Florettkämpfers möglich ist. – Hier ist sie! Der Tod, dessen Schenkel wie Dampfhämmer alles niedertrampeln und dessen Hände doch so sinnbetörend weich zu ergreifen wissen. – Das Janusgesicht, die Janusgestalt des zerstörenden Gottes, einer neuen Inkarnation des Gottes Shiwa." m.b. [Max Brod], "Getanzte Pazifismus", *Prager Tagblatt* 62, 23 April 1937.

¹⁷ The video excerpt with Death's solo is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5Uqe9K4zsY>; in particular bars 0:06–0:13. A video of the whole choreography of *The Green Table* is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxJslTxObU4&t=249s>

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Úvahy o postmoderní době* (Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství, 1995), 64–84.

Conclusion: According to Adorno

I hope that the example presented above gives an idea of what I understand as the sense of choreology as a scholarly discipline focused on dance. The central issue is the dance itself, its movement parameters, qualities bearing symbolic meanings communicated in the act of dancing, related to everyday movement patterns, and perceived and understood by dancers and observers/spectators on the basis of their cultural and social contexts. In a paper on the sociology of art, Theodor Adorno states that the sense of the sociological study of artistic phenomena lies not in the reflection of the place of art in society, nor in art's effects on society, but in the understanding of how society is objectivised in works of art, in their immanent socio-artistic content in connection with the unique creative, compositional methods employed.¹⁹ So, the sociology of art, Adorno says, needs to be interested mainly in the deepest relations between art and society, crystallised in the artistic creations themselves.²⁰ Following his considerations, I dare to generalise his ideas for the proposed choreology as a whole: the value of such a specialised scholarly discipline lies in the interpretation of dance as a symbolic means of communication related to cultural/social contexts on the basis of its movements and their inner qualities. It means that this discipline sees dance as a symbolic system of communication, with movements being communicated.

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, „Teze k sociologii umění (Věnováno Rolfu Tiedemannovi)“, *Sociologický časopis/ Czech Sociology Review* 3, no. 4 (1967), 421–424, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41128343>.

²⁰ Adorno, „Teze k sociologii umění“, 422, 424: „Jinými slovy, mám na mysli velmi specifickou otázku, která se vztahuje k plodům ducha: jakým způsobem se prosazují společenské strukturální momenty, pozice, ideologie atd. v uměleckých dílech. Bez obalu jsem zdůraznil neobyčejnou obtížnost tohoto problému a tím i problému sociologie hudby, která se nespokojí s vnějším uspořádáním, s otázkou, jaké místo má umění ve společnosti, jak v ní působí, ale která chce poznat, jak se společnost v uměleckých dílech objektivizuje.“ „K tomu, co je třeba určit, náleží také uměleckým dílům imanentní sociální obsah, jako např. vztah Beethovenův k občanské autonomii, svobodě, subjektivitě, až k jeho kompoziční metodě. Tento sociální obsah je – byť nevědomky – fermentem působivosti. Pokud se sociologie umění o to nezajímá, uniknou jí nejhlubší vztahy mezi uměním a společností: právě ony vztahy, které krystalizují v uměleckých dílech samých.“

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