

Dancing as Techniques of Body: Marcel Mauss

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Once when I was in Bali I found myself walking along a rural road up in the mountains in central island with a group of young Balinese men. It was a ceremonial ritual occasion and we were walking from one village to another to retrieve a set of masks that were stored in a temple. As we walked along chatting I noticed how distinctive was their “walk.” They walked like a Balinese man! I’d noticed it before, but on this occasion I decided I’d try to imitate their walk—see if I could become a Balinese man. They immediately noticed what I was doing and among peals of laughter they started coaching my walking. Try as I might I managed only to look rather ridiculous. My conclusion is that you have to be a Balinese man to walk like one. The implication is that the cultural gesture of walking one’s culture insinuates itself into the very tissue of one’s body shaping one’s walking. Walking is not simply something of a style one assumes, it is in a very physical neurophysiological sense who one is.

I have a female friend who is Indian. She was born in India and spent her early years there, but came to America when her father took an academic position here. She has continued to wear “Indian” clothing and hair and makeup styles throughout her life. She told me that when she went back to India to visit people often identified her as American despite her being Indian and appearing Indian. My hunch is that she walks or comports herself somehow physically “like an American” and these gestural patterns had insinuated themselves into her body to the point apparent to people in India.

Dancing is distinguished in most societies by culture, era, and gender among other things. We know and identify the people of a culture or subculture by how they dance, but also by how they walk, run, swim, eat, and many other cultural actions. Dancing then can be understood as gesture especially if understood in a rich sense.

In 1934 French sociologist Marcel Mauss wrote an important article titled “Techniques of the Body” that focused on what was to that time and continues rather often to be sidelined and ignored in a category of the miscellaneous. As understood by Carrie Noland in her recent deep and contextual reading of this article, Mauss laid the foundation for a rich understanding of gesture. As Noland notes, he was not interested in the “perfection” of the body or somehow isolating the “natural” body. Rather Mauss was interested in the meaning-making aspects of motor movements, in the way these movement experiences support yet establish a culturally identifiable signification.¹ He understood that there are three elements intertwined in these techniques: the mechanical/physical, the psychological, and the social. There are no “natural” ways for adults to act, rather all the techniques they know to use and comport their bodies have a basis in these three inseparable elements.

¹ Noland, p. 20.

Foundational to his understanding of gesturing, Mauss argued that “social conditioning reaches beyond ideas in the mind ... to lodge itself in the very tissues of the body” and that “cultural subjects have a lived experience of such social conditioning, that is, a sensual apprehension, in those tissues, of socially organized kinesis.”² Thus society imprints itself into the very tissue of its members through the performance of gestural patternings, while the performing of these gestures is sensually experienced as being of the fabric of their society. Mauss held these techniques to be central to an understanding of culture even more important than discursive performatives. Thus, for Mauss what people do is more important than what people say they do. Gesturing is central to the cultural construction of the body.³ From birth a member of society is “the subject of unintentional or intentional dressage.”⁴

Noland finds that Mauss understood gestures to exist on several registers: chains of movements performed by individual bodies, these gestures shape the bodies that perform them, and that gestures play a role in the wider system of social organization.

There is this somewhat paradoxical structure to gesturing, as we are coming to appreciate. Gesture imprints the values and distinctions of a society on the habitual bodily techniques of the individuals thus marking them as being of the society. However, since society exists as some collection of techniques of body that have experiential/sensual/psychological values, this opens the mechanism by which societies transform, the means by which individuals present resistance to society ... through changes in gesture, through the manner of performing the socially insinuated techniques of body.

Mauss’s work then establishes important beginnings to the development of a rich understanding of gesture, one that we will find important in our study of dancing.

² Ibid., p. 21.

³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴ Ibid., p. 26.