

Dancing is Moving, but not all Moving is Dancing

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The 1952 film “Singing in the Rain” became a classic of American musical films with perhaps the most well-known and memorable musical/dance number in all, the title song/dance. Everyone knows this song and dance done by Gene Kelly. It was filmed in two days with Gene suffering a fever throughout and numerous other issues arising that constantly had to be dealt with such as variable water pressure and that Gene’s suit shrank when it got wet. The results, however, were magical. Our concern here is to see dancing as movement, to place dancing in the larger context of movement, and to try to precisely understand what occurs that makes non-dance movement suddenly become dance. Let’s take a look at this number with particular attention to when Gene starts to dance. Is he dancing throughout the number? Is there a particular point when he seems to “break into” dancing? Let’s take a look.

The point is rather clear it seems. Gene tells Debbie goodnight and then feeling so exuberant he dismisses his ride and starts walking. It starts as a walk, energetic and rhythmic to be sure, but not yet dancing. He does more than just walk as he jumps up on the lamp post to express his happiness. But there is a precise moment when he appears to “break into” dancing and the lyrics of the song precisely mark when that occurs. The lyrics shift from “I’m singing in the rain,” and “I walk down the lane just singing in the rain,” to “I’m dancing in the rain.” Here the lyrics fall out and Gene dances in the enactment of happiness, joy, vitality, happiness and the sense of any exterior purpose or direction, such as walking home, disappears. There is not purpose or goal to the “dancing in the rain” other than the joy of doing so. As the dancing progresses it shades into play as Gene pretends to walk a tight rope and then, like a little boy, stomps and splashes in puddles in the street. What is it that we notice that we understand as “oh, that’s dancing!”? It must be, in part, the non-quotidian aspect of the movement, it must be, in part, something of the “overplus” of the movement, what I call “other” or “othering,” walking becomes more than an expression of exuberance, it becomes exuberance itself, it is movement also that has the quality of “incipience” in that it is about to be all the time, but never rests with something that has become. Thus in dancing there is a sense of virtuality, an unfolding in the manifesting moment, something that is coming into being, but is never actually there. At the end of the dance Gene “falls out” of dancing back into “just walking” and this is connected to the moment when we see Gene become aware in a self-reflective way of what he has been doing ... that he had become something “other” in dancing, that he had lost himself in a way. This small moment of almost embarrassment, an “oops, I wasn’t supposed to be doing that,” a small little sense (appropriate to the observer being a cop) that “dancing should somehow be illegal” (in the sense that humans should not be capable of actually doing this!). Thus Gene “falls out” of dancing back into walking and at this point his singing begins again.

Let’s look at another movie scene. This one is from Sally Potter’s 1997 film “The Tango Lesson.” Sally, starring in the film is learning to dance tango. Her relationship with her Argentine teacher, Pablo, is

quite rocky until they come to an arrangement that she is making a film of him teaching her to dance. Thus the film “The Tango Lesson” is in a sense a film about the making of the film. She goes to Buenos Aires with Pablo and connects with two other male tango dancers who agree to teach her and, of course, become part of her film. They, however, need studio space in which to practice and learn. The scene I want to focus on takes place as Sally and Pablo are walking down the street. They chat and then they “break into” dancing for a few steps and then separate and “fall out” of dancing for a bit. Then they connect in a tango frame and “break into” dancing again for an extended dance sequence down the walkway finally ending in a pose. They then look around, finding themselves returned to quotidian reality, look around them wonderingly as though the world has changed, and indeed it has; it is now snowing.

There is another scene near the end of the film where Sally and Pablo and two other male tango dancers are looking for studio space to use. Waiting to see the space, Sally asks Pablo to lay down a rhythm, which he does by “breaking into” dance steps. She and the others look on, but as Pablo is taken over by the rhythm he bursts through the doors to the space and spins down the floor followed by Sally and the others initiating a tango where Sally dances with all three men at once. While clearly there is a progression from not dancing to the rhythm pattern, to the interplay within the rhythm pattern by the other two dancers and then by Sally, and then there is the moment when the dancing itself seems to take over and the dancers are swept through the doors into the enormous and gorgeous studio in full blown salon-style (performance) tango. Since Sally Potter is the filmmaker, I think we must forgive her for her self-indulgence of dancing with three men and also because this is a reversal of the more common occurrence of one man dancing with several women.

What is key here is that even though there is a gradual development of the intensity and immersion of the dancers in the dance, there are clear demarcations between non-dance and dance. There is a precise moment when Pablo starts the “rhythm pattern.” There is a precise moment when the other male dancers begin dancing with him. There is a precise moment when Sally joins in the dance. And there is even a precise moment when the dancing seems to be occurring on its own rather than the dancers making it happen. Here even the camera joins into the action and, serving as our point of view, we can feel ourselves being swept along in the dancing.

In these examples, to introduce this section on movement, I want us to understand that dancing is certainly moving, it is a form of movement, but that not all movement can be considered to be dancing, except perhaps by some loose metaphoric extension. Further, I want us to understand that dancing requires specific sensorimotor programs that are distinctively and definitively dancing and that are not smoothly continuous with other sensorimotor movement patterns like walking. Vittorio Gallese and Lakoff¹ have noted that there are different sensorimotor programs for different types of movement. They observe that there is a difference between a cat walking, strutting, trotting, and galloping and that these are not seamlessly continuous. As we cannot shift from walking to running in a seamless continuum, we cannot seamlessly shift from walking to dancing. The difference is something like

¹ The Brain’s Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Conceptual Knowledge. In *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 2005, 21 (4) 2005.

shifting gears. This suggests that dancing is a type of movement that has a range of sensorimotor programming ... and that is worth considering.

In these two film scenes we have established the sequences: not dancing→dancing→not dancing and moving→dancing→moving. It would be a major mistake to simply focus only on dancing and ignore moving, for dancing is a kind of moving and always occurs in the context of human movement. Dancing certainly shares something of the qualities and importance of all human movement, while being discontinuous with other kinds of movement. We will learn much by considering human movement, the factors that distinguish dancing as a particular kind of human movement, and the seams that piece them together. There is what we will later elaborate as what we might refer to as a reversibility between dancing and moving, although it is an incomplete reversibility. In other words dancing is always moving, but it is a non-sustainable type of movement that always ceases to exist as other forms of movement continue, that is, so long as there is life. In this section we will focus on the larger more pervasive sense of movement as the grounding context for a more precise consideration of dancing. We might think of this approach in terms of Venn diagrams. In this section we will consider a large circle that incorporates all human movement. And we will do this as preparation for the deeper consideration of a smaller circle within which is the forms of movement we call “dancing.”