

How We Narrate Dance

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Dance history happens skin to skin.¹
(Stephen Petronio)

Inside Dance History

Das Forschungsprojekt *Inside Dance History* an der ZHdK untersucht tanzgeschichtliches und tanztechnisches Wissen als *Embodied Practice* von Tänzer*innen und Choreograf*innen. Das Projekt ist der Versuch, ein Narrativ zu generieren, das die Lehr- und Lernrealität von zeitgenössischen Tanzausbildungen an Kunsthochschulen wiedergibt. *Inside Dance History* erforscht die Tanzgeschichte deshalb aus der Perspektive der Tänzer*innen und Choreograf*innen. Der Forschungsansatz unterscheidet sich insofern von der Tanzwissenschaft, als dass der Tanz nicht als flüchtiges Phänomen verstanden wird, das es durch verbale Beschreibung und schriftliche Analyse einzufangen gilt, sondern als *Embodied Practice*, bei der die Aus- und Aufführung von Tanz auch immer die Performance von Körper-Wissen ist. Dabei konzentriert sich die Forschung auf audio-visuelle Formen der digitalen Archivierung als Medium der Wissensweitergabe.

Der vorliegende Beitrag fragt essayistisch nach der Rolle, die Serendipität in der Entstehung von Tanzgeschichte und Tanztechnik spielt. Es handelt sich um situative Zufälle aus dem Tanzstudio, die bedeutsame Merkmale von Tanzformen hervorgebracht haben und oftmals unter einem Schleier verborgen bleiben. In der Form der Anekdote lassen sich solche Situationen materialisieren und weitergeben – das Inside(r)-Wissen wird auf diese Weise zu einem Archiv, das einen direkten Zugang zu tänzerischer Wissenskultur erschließt. Der vorliegende Abdruck ist das Transkript einer *Online Lecture* im Powerpoint-Format.

1 Stephen Petronio in: Maia Wechsler (2018): *If the Dancer Dances*, DVD, Produktion: Lise Friedman, Maia Wechsler.

Friederike Lampert/
Jochen Roller:

How We Narrate Dance

1

If you google
Graham technique, this
comes up first.

2

Graham technique is based on the
opposition between contraction
and release, a concept based on the
breathing cycle which has become
a ‚trademark‘ of modern dance
forms. Its other dominant principle
is the ‚Spiraling‘ of the torso
around the axis of the spine.

3

Contraction and Release is a
concept based on the breathing
cycle that we find in many
modern and contemporary dance
techniques.

4

What about the other
dominant principle of
Graham technique?

5

The Spiraling of
the torso around
the axis of the spine?

6

Let's google:
spiraling+
Graham+
technique

7

Additionally, since Graham
technique emphasizes spirals in
the body, observing the form and
energy of spirals in nature - in
plants, for instance - may help you
understand how the pelvis and the
spine work together in twisting and
curving the torso.

8



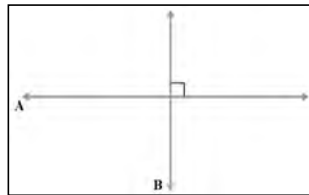
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„Alignment begins in the lower torso at the base of the spine. The lift of tense buttocks, hips and stomach stretches upwards through the core of the body to the base of the throat. A vertical line between the base of the spine and the base of the throat centers the erect torso.“
(The Martha Graham Dance Legacy Project)

10

„I am certain that movement never lies. There is only one law of posture I have been able to discover - the perpendicular line connecting heaven and earth.“
(Martha Graham)

11



12

So spiraling is about connecting heaven and earth.

13

As a perpendicular line, the torso can be expressive, using breath and contraction.

14



15

Over. Stretch. Stretch.
Curve. Pull. Together.
And one. Curve. And
Pull. Together.
And one.

16

„The spine is the tree
of life. Respect it.“
(Martha Graham)

17

This all makes sense.

18

Maybe too
much sense?

19

Is dance really
so intentional?

20

When did that line
connecting heaven and
earth appear?

21

Before

22

or after

23

Martha discovered that
contraction?

24

Did she find the
movement

25

or the meaning of the
movement?

26



27

„This is not competition. There
is no competition. You are in
competition with one person only
and that is the individual you know
you can become. And that is a thing
that makes a dancer's life the life
of a realist and gives it some of its
hazards and some of its wonder. It
is a creative process.“
(Martha Graham)

28

A dancer's life has its
hazard and its wonder.

29

It's a creative process.

30

Are we looking for the
hazard or the wonder?

31

Do we actually know
what we are looking for
in a creative process?

32

Is the creative process
about

33

finding the movement

34

or finding the meaning
of the movement?

35

In other words

36

do we think that
making dances is
intentional

37

or intuitive?

38



39

In most narratives
it is intentional.

40

In our funding
applications. In our
dance history books.
In our audience talks.
In our dance reviews.

41

But what if
the hazard of the
creative process
was its wonder?

42

Think Teflon.
Think Velcro.
Think LSD.

43

All haphazardly
discovered by
scientists looking for
a wonder in science.

44

Enter serendipity.

45

A principle based on
the Persian tale „The
3 Princes of Serendip“
in which the princes
make discoveries of
things they are not
looking for.

46

Which does not mean
they are not searching.

47

They just don't know
what they are searching
for.

48

In our funding
applications. In our
dance history books.
In our audience talks.
In our dance reviews.

49



50

„How many leaps did Nijinsky take
before he made the one that startled
the world? He took thousands and
thousands and thousands. And
it's that legend that gives us all
energy and strength to go back into
the studio to work again among
the many that we may be once be
reborn as the one.“
(Martha Graham)

51

If Nijinsky took all
these leaps without
knowing what he was
looking for

52

then why is the written
dance history such
a straight story of
intentions?

53

Enter the anecdote.

54

Our tool of an oral
dance history.

55

The pragmatic revealer
of situational hazards
that later turned into
intentional narratives.

56

As an example, listen to how Bill Forsythe talks about what is presented in the books as a „post-structuralist deconstruction of the ballet code“.

57



58

„We were sort of the people who basically took ballet off balance. It was a ‚why not mentality‘. I was talking to Merce Cunningham once and he did this really goofy thing. Merce said to me: ‚I said to myself: Why not?‘ That was pretty much our attitude. Almost like an algorithm. If this - then what? We didn't know. We try things and then deal with the results.“

(William Forsythe)

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We try things and then we deal with the results.

60

Dealing with the results of creative processes can naturally lead to defining this process

61

as a „post-structuralist deconstruction of the ballet code“.

62

But from a dancer's view, the written narratives of our dances are too intentional.

63

There are so many stories out there of dances that took on a specific form because they were invented in spaces that were too small.

64

There are so many stories out there of dances that took on a specific form because they were invented by dancers that were too small.

65

There are so many stories out there of dances that took on a specific form because they were invented by dancers whose budget was too small.

66

You can call these dances whatever you like.

67

But you also need to acknowledge the dynamics of the creative process.

68

Which might not be as intentional as you make them.

69



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„An important key word is narration. How we narrate our life retrospectively. When we narrate our own life we tend to eliminate chance. In retrospective, everything makes sense. This is my path of life and everything looks like it evolved really organically. Of course we also gloss over some things so that something that wasn't actually good for you was in the end good for your life. This retrospective narration eliminates all chance.“ (Svenja Flaspöhler)

71

Serendipity has an antagonist called bahramdipity.

72

Bahramdipity is
the suppression of a serendipitous
discovery by a powerful individual
that favors a narrative based on
intention over a narrative based on
intuition.

73

Creative processes
are full of hazards
and wonders.

74

Think Teflon.
Think Velcro.
Think LSD.

75



76

„LSD has multiply effects. There
is the sensory effects - synesthesia,
hallucination - there is the
euphoria, but LSD and several other
drugs including marijuana also
stimulate brain centers that attach
meaning to external stimulæ.“
(Perry Wilson)

77

Let's keep stimulating
our brain centers by
attaching meaning to
external stimulæ.

78

But also, let's find
a place for serendipity
in our dance history

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and start to tell the
story of dance from a
dancer's view.

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