

# How We Narrate Dance

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Dance history happens skin to skin.<sup>1</sup>

(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.

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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



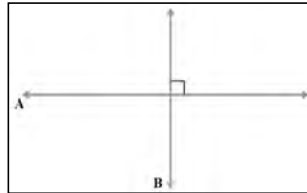
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„Alignment begins in the lower torso at the base of the spine. The lift of tense buttocks, hips and stomach stretches upwards through the core of the body to the base of the throat. A vertical line between the base of the spine and the base of the 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)

59

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



70

„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 stimulae.“  
(Perry Wilson)

77

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

78

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

79

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

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