

The Two Axes of the Performing Body, Vertical and Horizontal

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Introduction

The performing arts are difficult to handle. They vanish at the moment of appearing without leaving a trace. For this reason, there is no perfect way to analyze performing arts. Nevertheless, I here attempt the possibility of dance analysis along two axes, in order to analyze a "traditional" art in Japan.¹⁾

I analyze odori, a traditional Japanese dance, along a vertical axis and a horizontal axis. The vertical axis addresses the pictorial dimension in dancing, and the horizontal one recognizes the narrative in dancing. These two dimensions constitute odori. There are three reasons for using two axes as a means of analysis. First, the two axes need the positions of both dancer and audience. Not until both dancer and audience start reading dance do the two axes appear. The interaction between dancer and audience makes the state of a dance movement

1) The word "traditional" is equivocal. In the context of Japanese theater, "traditional" is identified with a particular style or/and a technique of body movements. For example, all Kabuki plays with skilled Kabuki actors are regarded as traditional even though there are new plays continually written and produced. Odori, one of the Japanese dance genres, is treated as a traditional Japanese dance in just the same way as Kabuki. Usually, odori is danced in kimonos, which create the atmosphere of old Japan, and accompanied by shamisen music, which reminds the audience of the Edo period. When the dancer choreographs odori herself, although the movement she creates is original, the dance is still treated as traditional. However, odori becomes a truly traditional dance when the skilled dancer performs it as a memory dance, a reminder of historical dancing.

appear. Odori can be treated as a theatrical event as well as a dance. A dancer without an audience can be a dancer, but dance without an audience cannot be dance. Second, the two axes are intended to be applicable in recognizing other theatrical representations. In this, they are similar to two concepts in linguistics; the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. To use these two axes is an effective way to analyze various dance performances from a common point of view. Third, a dance appears within the framework of the coexistence between dancer and audience. Not only the interaction between them, but also the outside context constitutes the dance. In this sense, a dancer stimulates the audience and awakens its memory, which comes from outer contexts, such as traditions. We will see how HANAYAGI Toshinami's dance awakens historical memories.

1. Two Axes²⁾

In order to analyze dance, I have set up two axes, which will be the directions of our active reading. I will analyze each in turn.

1-1. Vertical Axis

When we watch dancing, the first thing that we notice is the movement that a dancer creates. However, we also find stillness in movement. The sensation of stillness in movement comes from the form of the body. There is then a tension between the dynamism of the movement and the stillness and longing of the form. In fact, stillness may be equally impressive for the audience. The still pose of the dancer leaves a strong impression on us. This powerful still pose constitutes the

2) As references for preceding work on this subject, I mention the following books.

1. Gabriele Brandstetter, *Tanz-Lektüren Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995. Her analysis of dance with two figures of body expression, Pathosformel and Toposformel, is, however, done not on one performance as I do here, but on dance history.

2. Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. This is a dance analysis of choreographers with contemporary semiotics and post-structuralist criticism.

virtual axis. This axis is the one through which we see the forms of the dancing body. It is, as it were, the axis of a picture. Within this axis, dance is identified with a series of picturesque poses. The form is appreciated as taking a position in space. Here, the dancer tries to strike an appropriate pose, and, in siding with the dancer in this form or another, the audience chooses one interpretation from many potentialities. The dancers and the audience choose their interpretation and, in doing so, isolate the form of the body metaphorically. This act of selecting is based on the recognition of one-dimensional dots. In this sense, there is no time progression here. The dance consists of various still forms and within this axis we find and appreciate these forms in the moving body. The vertical axis takes place in space beyond movement and time. However, it is also true that the aggregation of all the forms is still not yet a dance itself. A dance is more than a set of still forms. It is necessary to take another axis to read and analyze the dance as a whole.

1-2. Horizontal Axis

This axis serves to connect the forms and to find a unity of forms in dancing. Thus, it works as the syntagmatic dimension because each successive form extends movement. The vertical axis and the horizontal then merge in a mutually complementary relationship. If the forms of the vertical axis are viewed as dots, the horizontal axis plays the role of the connecting line. When forms are connected together, they become a gesture or behavior which brings a story. Therefore, this horizontal axis constitutes the story telling in movement. The dancer tries to make the movement continuous, so it is outside of space. This axis only concerns the temporal dimension, and therefore form does not matter here.

Each axis implies a way of reading and analyzing dance, and they cooperate with each other in order to define dance as a phenomenon.

2. Axis Switching

We saw how the two axes cooperate with each other and depend on each other. The axes build on each other. In reading dance, only one axis is readily apparent

at a time. One axis is potential and submerged while the other is actual and at work. Then, change occurs and one axis sets off the other. The vertical axis suggests the starting point of the horizontal axis in creating a unity. Thus, it is appropriate to explain the moment of switching as the next step, in order to clarify the characteristics of the axes.

2-1. Still-Pose / Movement

One of the moments of switching occurs between the still-pose and the movement. While the body is moving, the audience and dancer concentrate on connecting dance movements between different forms, part to part.

In contrast, when the dancer stops her movement and takes a still-pose in front of me, I focus on the form of the body. The still-pose of the dancer compels me to see the position in space and my vision zooms in like a camera. Then, I change from the horizontal axis into the vertical axis. Within the vertical axis, the object is perceived as form itself in space.

2-2. Dance and the Text Sung

One more thing to say about the moment of switching is how the text of songs affects the reading of the dance. If the dance is accompanied with texts of songs, the texts influence the dance reading and change the direction of axes.

The dance is connected both to the music and to the lyrics. So, the dance can be read with the words that are sung. The lyrics and the body movements reinforce each other's understanding. Understanding the body movements leads us to read the lyrics, but lyrics especially aid the interpretation of the body movements. This is the horizontal reading. When a dancer bends his/her back and pretends to walk with a stick, the word *old* in a song allows me to recognize his/her movement more easily as that of an old person. The meaning of the text forms a sequence of movements. However, a dance with songs is often read horizontally. With the help of words, it is easier to pull together continuing movements into one behavioral unity.

3. An Example for Analysis—HANAYAGI Toshinami's Dance

Here, I take a dance performance as an example of the interaction of the two axes in the Japanese dance. A Japanese dancer, HANAYAGI Toshinami, performs a dance well suited for an analysis of the two axes. Her dance also clarifies the characteristics of Japanese dance. I will show you one of her dance performances, which invokes notions of the traditional dance.

This dance, *Miyako-kenbutsuzaemon*, is danced to a school of old Japanese story telling music, Itchu-bushi. Although this music was written and composed around 1727,³⁾ HANAYAGI Toshinami has recently choreographed this dance in Su-odori style, because we have lost the old choreography. As the title *Miyako-kenbutsuzaemon*, which means "A sightseer in Kyoto," tells us, the dancing and the music describe the scenes and people in Kyoto.

(Video, *Miyako-kenbutsuzaemon* by HANAYAGI Toshinami)⁴⁾

Her body movement always has some missing elements that remind us of something more, yet to come. The element of recollection has three levels.

First, her dance movement is not very accurate. It does not show the sharp line of the body movement because of her old age. Her physical ability has declined and the line is not as sharp as it used to be. Such a lack of physical ability is recognized along the vertical axis. However, that does not mean her dancing is less appreciated. Her dancing has acquired the form of another style, which is

3) It is said that MIYAKO Itchu the first composed this song for Kabuki dancing, but the second played it first at Ichimura Theater during a Kabuki play, *Yagoenotori-ousyuugenji*, in 1726. (Higuchi, Sodou, *Itchufushi*, private edition, 1916. Republication: *Kinseibungei kenkyuusousyo*, Kinseibungei kenkyuusousyo kankoukai hen. Dai 2 ki Geinouhen 35 Hougaku 3 Kuresu-shuppan, 1998.)

4) I am talking about the performance played at *Su-odori no kai* in the Small Hall, National Theater of Japan, on March 17, 2001. She first performed this dance in 1964. However, the videotape as a reference was recorded in 1993 for an NHK broadcasting program.

different from the one she used to have. She dances like this because she recognizes it is impossible to dance as fast and sharply as she used to do and has found another way to move her body.

The new form that she has acquired tends toward the horizontal axis. This is the second level. The horizontal axis is the axis of connecting movements. Almost all traditional Japanese dances are accompanied by the texts of the music, *monku*. Different from mime which keeps to the meanings of the segmental language only, her dance becomes similar to how language functions. Her dance has more stories to draw from as she gets old. That means her dance becomes more like a work of literature than a picture. Here, to find the correct form is not so important. What is important is not the form in general, but how to make us recognize her potential dancing. Because of the evocative words, her dance approaches the level of literary imagery.

HANAYAGI Toshinami reminds us of her potential figure only as a subtle hint in her dance. It is not important to dance perfectly. What is important is to dance to evoke the imagination. Every *odori* dancer aims at this ideal dance. Because she so effectively connects movements, the dance composition looks like the texts of the song.

Finally, her dance condenses into a moment and becomes a point in memory. In memory, there is no time procession as in having a beginning and an end, and no actual space. Here, forms and movements are under the same condition and become a point of view. This is the pregnant point of vanishing forms and movements.⁵⁾ However, it is also the point where we can most fully perceive the forms and movements, and which reminds us of ideal dancing. And, this is the meeting point of the two axes. It is like the perfect still-pose as *dynamis*, which is located at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes. At this point, it becomes finally possible to form a recollection of the body from the picture axis,

5) This idea of the pregnant point derives from *Laokoon* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, but different in the point of actuality. (Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke und Briefe, Band 5/2, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke 1766-1769, Laokoön*, Herausgegeben von Wilfried Barner, Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990.)

and from the story-telling axis simultaneously. As a result, the traces make us remember the whole potential dancing body that she could have. A small part only hints at a larger potentiality. Therefore, it is the highest aim of the traditional Japanese dance to be a reminder of ideal dance, which only some old masters have succeeded in doing after a long training. Even such a subtle hint can awaken our memory. The hint is the trace of historical, stylized movements that dancers have acquired in odori. As a result, only one move in odori suggests the long tradition that the dance and the dancer carry with them. When there is a movement, there is not always a dance. The reverse is also true, at least in the context of Japanese dance which belongs to the theater as well as dance. When there is a dance, there is not always a movement. Movements appear chiefly in the relation of dancer and audience. These processes form the rhetoric found in Japanese dance, recollections of traditional dancing.⁶⁾

Conclusion

Two axes found in the dancing body lead the audience to actively read the dance, which makes the dance appear in front of them as a phenomenon. The two axes, the pictorial and the narrative, correspond to two ways of reading and analyzing the body. Using the two axes, we saw how the traditional Japanese dance of odori, as exemplified by HANAYAGI Toshinami, serves its highest aim by awakening recollections of times long past.

6) When talking about the traditional Japanese arts, *kata* plays an inevitable role in the scenes of trainings and performances. However, here I did not use this term because it is a polysemous word and too ambiguous to make this discussion clear.