

LOST IN TRANSLATION
Making Sense of Dance Through Words.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to enter into the debate about meaning and movement and challenge the idea of dance as linguistic communication. Without words, and even with words according to some linguistic theorists, it's not possible to make sense unless we come to an agreement about a set of shared concepts. This is difficult in dance, an art form that has been silent, but undergoing evolutionary change for a large part of its history. I take the point of view that performance movement is even more arbitrary than text as a form of signification. We can read words prescriptively. We agree what a word means and what concepts a word might refer to. But even then in the combination of words we can *interpret* meaning differently. Even words can be confusing. We are forced at times in conversation in our first or 'natural' language to ask: "What do you mean?" So how can dance be read - when there is little semantic agreement about what a gesture, or a dance step might mean? Maybe we can't read dance. Perhaps what we read, and the only thing we can read, are the words, embedded, attached, contained, and generally surrounding the movement because we are verbal creatures. We can read words easily, after gaining an education, but reading nonverbal communication is fraught with difficulties and misunderstandings. Dance can be enjoyed viscerally and with kinesthetic empathy, but to read dance you have to *want* to see a story or *believe* that what you are seeing is story. And that seems to be a natural human trait – to want to make sense. Humanity is unique in being the only story-telling animal.

We need to be schooled in the appreciation of artwork and in particular abstract, visual art, or dance if we are to explain what meaning is conveyed by the work, what is assumed, and how the meaning comes about.

DECLARATION

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Table of Contents

Page i Cover Page
Page ii Abstract
Page iii Declaration and acknowledgement
Page iv Table of Contents

Introduction 1-4

Ch 1 Learning to Read 5-15

Ch 2 Understanding 16-31

Ch 3 Verbal Signification 32-38

Ch 4 Words as Language 39-45

Ch 5 Movement as Language 46-50

Ch 6 Translation 51-57

Ch 7 Unreliable Nonverbals 58-64

Ch 8 Intuition 65-70

Ch 9 My Work 71-81

Conclusion 82-88

Bibliography

Introduction

Watching dance can evoke emotional states and even on reflection can move one to feel energized, aroused, or even confused and thoughtful. When dance makes us ruminate on an idea, like a cow chewing on its cud, we are challenged to dialogue internally between emotion and thought; between philosophy and poetry; between the mind and the heart. But not all dance can do that for me. Perhaps that is because I am lacking in education and simply (blissfully or wilfully) ignorant. Or is it just the way I am? Are we born with a particular aesthetic and way of seeing (reading) the world in which our responses are merely idiosyncratic and unchangeable; a potential that once reached is exhausted? Is it only some people have the ability or the capacity to enjoy or understand art? Then similarly the difference between genius and average is decided in the womb and discovered only infrequently *in vivo*? Or is art an idiosyncratic expression like the way we each speak our language, a latent talent that takes time to develop and, perhaps, to quote one of my favourite dance teachers: 'perseverance is the only measure of success'?

This idiosyncratic aesthetic would appear to influence many of the choices we make each day, for example the type of food we eat and not just the type of art we appreciate. Through experimenting with different foods, however, our palate is broadened and we develop a taste for different foods. Similarly, through sampling and experimentation with the aesthetic palate, we can appreciate a range of art. Art can sometimes jolt us into a new and different experience and this can create a challenge. When experiencing a new and exotic flavour, we question what we know and make comparisons, but we are also drawn into an aesthetic appreciation that might be beyond words. Do we embrace the new flavour or remain true to the inertia of our taste buds? Some tastes may never become acceptable to us. The tension we feel when watching something alien

but interesting relates to a re-education or cultural shock that occurs if we are engaged by a work of art.

Sometimes we do not have words to describe what this sensation or experience is and, thus, when we do not have or do not want to use words, we utilize nonverbal modalities. For instance, if we get really carried away by our emotions we may do a little dance.

And when we get carried away, we enter a strange twilight zone where things are not as they seem and we process the experience in a less than conscious way. In this type of experience, we are aware that something has been revealed aesthetically and emotionally, but not necessarily fully comprehended intellectually. Is it individual taste that decides why some dance work resonates and/or communicates, while other work is impenetrably dense or ambiguous; or contrastingly, unambiguous *and* uninteresting? It is more than an issue of just a lack of crafting? Even well crafted work can be ambiguous, or alternatively, dull. Some combinations of fact and fiction in performance really work for me, while another might fail to communicate on many levels.

Art, can tell us much about history and culture. But I do not believe art can replace textual chronicles. Words alone do not seem to be enough for humanity to explore the human experience. Art's function is not to replace words; it exists because we choose to express ourselves outside of, or alongside, linguistic languages. The reason art can effectively engage us is because it draws from the fabric of everyday expressions of life and represents our experiences in a way that makes the unconscious conscious. Because humans are curious and have imagination maybe art cannot help but communicate? As a result of our imagination we tend to see things whether they are there or not. Whether we read the same message as another viewer or are repulsed or ecstatic as a result is another matter.

When it comes to **understanding** art, it seems that like linguistic languages, we need to be taught how to read – especially regarding genre-specific language. One genre is entirely different from another and one artistic work can be read entirely differently from another even if produced by the same artist. If we want to find a more closed reading, the learning curve for each genre can be quite steep. This makes understanding art extremely complex and brings tension to the processes of interpreting artwork. If we must be aware of unique codes, conventions and meanings embedded in an artwork and make perfect sense of what is experienced, then we could converse using art as our natural language. Is there only one way to look at and interpret an artwork, like in linguistic language – where a horse is usually a horse? Or is meaning arbitrary outside text and art is everything we see and choose to interpret according to how we see the world? Is every opinion equal today if meaning is arbitrary?

The issues that I would like to explore in this paper have to do with the question of language origins and how we communicate, and therefore how art communicates, particularly in dance. Do we learn to dance and communicate for a reason or is it that we are just built this way and have no choice? Maybe dance exists normally as a necessary and unconsciously hard-wired human practice, like language, but has become today a specialised practice for a small part of our society – like a dead language. Dance as performance art today seems to be an activity that is opaque to most people or is at least unpopular in Australia, yet dance is common to every culture at most times in their histories. On the dance stage, I do not often see choreography that communicates very much at all. Watching with the knowledge that there is supposed to be a message often gives rise to many questions for me. When I look at art I wonder: “Does that mean that? Why does that mean that?”

When choreographers make dance perhaps they are not making sense, but rather making non - sense? Douglas Dunn in *Talking Dancing* attempts, philosophically, to define what is dance and what is talking. He compares

dancing with talking and using the trickery of words makes dancing into talking, and not dancing into talking as well (Banes1987:200,201). In our attempt to translate words or ideas into dance perhaps words similarly fail us in being able to describe or interpret what we have seen? Or perhaps I should say that movement's **nonverbal** signs fail me? Words actually do their job quite well, all things considered, but it has taken millennia, and for me 17 years of institutional education, and still communication through words takes skill. My experience as a dancer and choreographer tells me that even with skill, communication through movement alone needs both specificity and contextual relationships that makes understanding difficult and ambiguous. Contrastingly, I often see a theatre/drama performance which generates a great deal of meaning for me, and I love that while the words are being delivered, the body is doing its part as well, (like in normal life).

Humankind is the only animal that tells stories and dances or watches dance for pleasure. It would seem logical then that, before we can understand obscure meanings or abstractions, we need to explore the concrete and the everyday. We learn to speak and read the alphabet before we write poetry. To understand the story, *if there is a story*, we need words. If there is no story, we need a peculiarly human gift, an imagination.

1. Learning to Read

It is a human tendency to separate life into sacred and profane, body and mind, practical and artistic: pedestrian and aesthetic motion. But Cartesian thought probably did not occur to pre-literate ancient humans. Before the word was spoken humanity may have thought more holistically. With the loss of oral culture, when the word arrived and “dwelt among us”, we became *civilised* and as a result became separated into body and non-body? And is that because the word is superior, and the body is unreliable in giving meaning to spoken words? I will show that where it concerns communication we rely on the words spoken but have difficulty interpreting the implicit language communicated by the body.

The keys to extraordinary aesthetic motion having inherent value are fashioning and meaning: fashioning involves embellishment, distortion, deletion, rearrangement, abstraction, contrast, miniaturization, and projection of personality (Hanna 1979:38-39).

Hanna seems to confirm how complex it is to read physical communication, with or without fashioning, and therefore how difficult it is to communicate effectively without words. How can we understand anything choreographic, if communication of an idea in extraordinary aesthetic motion---that is in dance---undergoes a journey through all of the filters above? If we did the same to text (ie embellish, distort, delete, rearrange) it might end up as difficult to read as hieroglyphics without the Rosetta stone. This is what we do with dance, and much is lost in translation.

There is much discussion today in dance performance of intertextuality, and interest in artistic methods used to distance or link the creation from or to the creator, and hence tease out what or who it is that gives meaning to the artwork (Adshead-Lansdale et al 1999). Once dance was **only** read as a ‘closed text’ however contemporary authors and critics are scratching below the surface of the dance to find myriad readings, and then “dance may begin to look richer and

less mysterious” (Morris 1996: vii). I wonder if this process itself renders dance rather into a more mysterious practice? Then the mysteriousness of dance leads us to invent meaning in dance where there is none.

Postmodernists claim that because art is a language (a stance verified arguably to a greater or lesser extent by semioticians) and language is unreliable, then it is the audience who determines what a work means. Others insist that dance is only **language-like**. So, the Cage/Cunningham collaborations and a variety of post, and post-post modernists like William Forsythe posed the hypothesis that audiences, in receiving and processing information/sensation, actually *make* the meaning of a work of art. Considering Cunningham’s works Susan Foster says:

Like the dancers, members of the audience are free to bring a variety of interpretations to the dance.....Each viewer’s experience is unique, not simply because each person has a different heritage of associations to the dance but because each viewer has literally made a different dance (Foster, 1986, pg 41).

Some socio-cultural theorists argue that texts are meaningless until a community of readers agree on conventions that enable a reading to occur (Morris 1996: iv,v). Contemporary work today, like Forsythe’s, distinguishes between “the author as origin of a text’s meaning and the author as absent trace, with no more control over meaning than any spectator” (Adshead-Lansdale 1999:13). So when a choreographer claims to have made a work about a particular thing, or say that the work says this or that, I wonder if they are telling the truth. Is it possible for dance to have a discrete meaning, for when has there ever been a dance work with a meaning that a community of readers has agreed upon? I imagine that a traditional, oral community that passed information generation to generation through song and dance might be one example. If this situation has occurred in recent art history, I wonder as well, which came first to make the dance legible: the reading or the writing? Perhaps it does not matter. Maybe dance is just supposed to be looked at, understood in relation to the culture it springs from,

and not judged for its content or thereby analysed intellectually? However, because we have words, we cannot help but filter what we see through words, and sensation alone, for civilised woman, is not trusted anymore.

According to psychologists (Spelke 2005:31), we first learn to read and, then from around age 8-9, we read to learn.

The assistance provided by language, in its dual role as expression of thought and vehicle of communication, becomes ever more essential, as children manifest a desire to learn and to become acquainted with their surroundings (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:214).

At between one and two years of age most children recognize that “verbal signs have meaning” (Vygotsky 2005:295), while demonstrations of ‘practical intelligence’ (i.e. tool use, systematic movement and perception) occur as early as six months (Ibid:293). First we do, then, we attempt to speak. Action comes before words developmentally, but words eventually take over from action, at least in civilised football players. From an early age, we have installed a blueprint for how to read and, hence, though it is a complex and interactive web, how to filter, store and interpret what we see, at least in regard to text. But while the infant brain is ready for speech, it takes time and experience to grow communication skills.

How we read or understand other physical realities, depth perception, colour, verticality, may be more dependent on sense organs, and lower parts of the brain may be unprogrammable. A deficiency of the sense organs at a cellular level (eg. blindness) may be incurable, but using a palette of oil paints can be taught. Similarly influences on our sensorial states can be brought to our attention as adults, but their effect on us is usually quite unconscious, unless we actually focus on them and try to intellectually reason what is affecting us.

Theatres often have a green room, for artists and theatre workers to ‘hang out’ when not working. It is hard to know whether green is a psychologically

calming colour that is hard wired in humans or a culturally determined colour invested with the idea of calmness. Theatre workers may feel good while inhabiting the green room, but it may be that any place is wonderfully calm after the stress of the stage? Many aspects of human development are similarly dependent upon processes of feedback from initial stimuli, and it is difficult to decipher causality.

[I]nitial knowledge is central to common sense reasoning throughout development. Intuitive knowledge of physical objects, people, sets and places develops by enrichment around a constant core, such that the knowledge guiding infants' earliest reasoning stands at the center of the knowledge guiding the intuitive reasoning of older children and adults. (Spelke 2005:28).

We need some initial information as infants to develop normal language, but even without learning we develop a form of language. People who are blind and/or deaf from birth cannot develop all the “nuances and complexities of normal language” of sighted and hearing people, although they develop their own “species of sign language, a language that has the essential properties of spoken languages but in a different medium” (Chomsky 1988:39). This language ability is both “unique to” and “common to the (human) species” (Chomsky 1988:38). We are different to animals.

Though linguistic languages first occur in an oral environment, historically a form of written codification eventually binds the oral tradition. This code is read, first before it can be intuited and the two skills are then somehow linked as a result. There are relatively few oral cultures left in our world, but the learning journey from oral to written learning and then to intuition is a curious pathway. Learning to read is essential for today's children as we understand our world as adults first and foremost through text. If we cannot read we are virtually unemployable.

The understanding of aesthetic concerns might also be linked to the coding of how we first see the world with language. De Boysson-Bardies suggested that one's first language may also set up one's first or most prominent aesthetic. By studying the behaviour of toddlers in relation to "the language and culture of their maternal and social environment, as manifested in their first words" (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:185), De Boysson-Bardies found that "despite a certain community of words reflecting general needs and universal language categories, and beyond individual variations," different nationalities had different expressive styles (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:185). French babies were hedonistic, Americans pragmatic and social, Swedes had a taste for action while they were unsociable in their speech and the Japanese had a uniquely developed aesthetic sense as they "displayed a slight environmentalist or poetic tendency, which led them to mention elements of nature rather than household objects" (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:213). Cultural differences exist in ways we might then classify as linked to personality. Across cultures we share the acquisition of language as an interactive process, but language development leads to different languages in different cultures.

[D]espite the existence of common foundations, [language development] very soon finds itself subject to variability among languages, modes of transmission, and – in more subtle ways – individual styles (De Boysson Bardies 2001:213).

How this early cultural influence relates to nonverbal forms leads one to question whether there is a link between the development of our first form of language and languages of practice like dance. If we consider dance as both a language and a demonstration of culture, when we specialize in a particular style or practice, it may be that we also predispose ourselves to that style at the cost of being able to appreciate others. What we know can predispose us to particular sorts of knowing while our accent may make us unintelligible to someone who speaks another dance language.

As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know (Donald Rumsfeld as cited in Watson 2003:45).

Like Donald Rumsfeld, but with less words and more feeling, Umberto Eco believes we travel through life with “background books,” meaning we carry “preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition” (Eco 1998:54).

In a very curious sense we travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover. In other words, the influence of these background books is such that, irrespective of what travelers discover and see, they will interpret and explain everything in terms of these books (Eco 1998:54).

Eco gives the example of Marco Polo who on first encountering a rhinoceros in Java, called it a Unicorn because that is what European Medieval tradition defined an animal with one horn, and what Marco Polo was hoping to discover.

I wonder if dance is usually watched in the same way? We have been told, and/or want to believe that dance communicates clearly and magically and like Marco Polo, as an audience, we go away “interpreting and explaining” a unicorn, when we have actually seen a rhinoceros, because both the program notes and the books we carry with us have told us what to see. With dance I wonder if we miss a step and assume we know how to read dance codes and what dance means, when we are actually reading something else, or not reading at all but simply watching and imagining?

We can learn codes and how to interpret them but in the end “Codes are critical constructions” (Monaco 2000:175). Artists tend to make work without considering the combination of the codes that convey meaning. They know not exactly what they are doing and how they are doing it. The codes are “derived after the fact” or “exist outside” (Ibid) of the art form and can be reproduced and

interpreted because they describe what we do everyday and can be recognized. For example, the way people comb their hair is a recognizable practice but can become a code when we use the gesture in dance. While Monaco discusses codes in relation to film, he notes that they “are not pre-existing laws that the filmmaker consciously observes” (Ibid). This idea also relates to dance. We make sense because the way we make art is dictated in part by the way we are educated. Our hard wiring decides outcomes for us even if we try not to have an outcome. It is actually hard for us to not make sense because we seek meaning. Regarding speech comprehension, McNeill found that: “listeners try to extract meaning even when speech is used abnormally” (1979:14). We seem to seek meaning when we listen. Do we do the same when we look, especially if what we see, like dance, has an interpretable form, and more than one possible reading?

Simply watching

Ambiguity is something we deal with each day when we look for clues to, or try to ‘second guess’ someone's intentions. In reality, if I believe someone bears me ill will, I will see/read/imagine precisely that in any and every interaction, while someone observing the same interaction might tell me that I am being paranoid! We have to use our imagination to interpret certain situations but if that is all we use we may get the wrong impression. Similarly, if we confuse style, or the messenger with the message, we are apt to get the wrong information. For example, though a person expressing anger may not be angry with me in particular, I read their anger clearly and might imagine I am the object of their disaffection. Yet what I imagine is a polite request for change in a dark alley could lead to being mugged. Context is essential to understanding each situation and each person’s intention. “[A]ll meanings are situational” (Hanna 1979:44) and “meaning is inherent in the rules of combination” (Hanna 1979:46).

Imagination is a powerful and peculiarly human gift. Covey reasons that it is because of the development of this human gifts that humans can contribute to society (Covey 1997:32) and make art. The cycle of awareness, conscience,

creative imagination and independent will all inter-relate in the process of making dance as a matter of course. But the use of imagination can make for an ambiguous creation and, therefore, ambiguous readings. We can miss most information unless we *actively* look for it.

...ambiguity has always inhabited musical art (indeed, all the arts), because it is one of arts most potent aesthetic functions. The more ambiguous, the more expressive, up to a certain point (Gilmour 1986:56).

Reading the Image

The ears do not consciously filter sound, they only receive and channel to the brain, where some filtering can occur. But we can focus and direct the eyes, making sight the pre-eminent sense, enabling the reading of one page in isolation from everything else in the room, for example. When we look at a picture, it can be read by considering various aspects of both the work and its time and place in history, but the unravelling of this condensed meaning is dependent upon translation and commentary (Gilmour 1986:54). Gilmour argues that studying a picture helps us to grasp the concept of artistic intuition. "Although the image is singular, it contains multiple, conflicting strands of meaning" (Ibid). We receive this information more or less directly, without translating it in terms of discursive reason (Ibid: 56). But in terms of paintings, or singular images, it is necessary to have a "prolonged investigation of their surfaces" (Ibid).

The same could be said for dance, though this is much more difficult as dancers do not stay still for long and the image changes both figuratively and physically. Dance often needs repeated viewings (prolonged investigation) for an audience to detect indications of meaning. A dance work is often made using alterations of movement phrases exploring theme and variation with different permutations of setting or dancer. In a way, dance replays an idea over and over until we get the idea (usually in a single sitting), or we just get bored!

Like clues in a Sherlock Holmes mystery, disorder or seeming mayhem can be difficult to discern as anything more meaningful than what disorder first appears to be, even by focus-able eyes. Monaco says that we can “ignore the connotative power of film, but the observer who has learned to read film has a multitude of connotations” (2000:169). The first time I watch a movie, I might miss the complexity of an actor's portrayal. On second and third viewing, I can understand better the characterization in terms of the history, motivation and relationships specific to a character. The relationships between characters can drive (or accompany) the narrative and (connotatively) enable us to see clues that confirm or deny an effective performance. If it is a love story we expect to see people not only ‘say’ they’re in love, they should also show they’re in love. In the real world, we don't get to replay (as in a video) everyday communications with our friends/enemies, so we have to remember or imagine what was said or meant and place our own interpretations on the interactions in progress.

Consciousness is built out of experiences issuing from perception, memory, the formation of concepts, and interactions with others, as well as from the relations among these experiences (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:213).

How we relate these experiences enables us to both imagine and make meaning as adults. Being able to express this imagination in a form that is readable is perhaps the skill of a good artist. Monaco says for film the attraction is in “how it is shot and how it is presented” (2000:169). The attraction of dance is not so much what is the content but in how it is danced and performed. Susan Foster observes that “For Balanchine the dance is consummately visual” and the most important part of his ballets is the “visual spectacle” and not the story (1986:17). I’m with Balanchine. Dance is a unique language system in that there are greater numbers of connotations possible when we watch. So even if we learn to read dance very well, depending on our perspective we may find very little story there, or many stories.

In a Hollywood movie the images and language are familiar and not usually abstracted, or hyperbolized. But some films, like dance, may also employ devices that subvert the reality of the framed image to affect a particular reading. The movie *Traffic* utilizes two colour filters to compare life in America and life in Mexico, where scenes in Mexico have a warm sepia type of colour, scenes in America are a cool blue. On first viewing, the colours may not appear significant but as the movie progresses, or in subsequent viewings, it becomes very obvious. The use of these colours is also dependent on a cultural convention, where blue indicates one state (emotional and/or geographical) while sepia stands for another. Warmer and colder may be rationally linked with our experience of the natural world, e.g. ice and fire, but using the colours associated with a natural state in a creative application (film) might bypass our reason but convince us subliminally. The use of lighting is similarly important in setting the scene for dance. Ballerinas dressed in a white tu-tu are usually lit with a strong blue colour to enhance their supernatural beauty or ethereal quality, and the use of colour usually follows some choreographic thematic logic. We may not register that the lighting state has changed but still be moved emotionally by the colours.

Text, like performance, or everyday human relationships, also requires filters or *non verbal mental projections* to make meaning (Jackson 1999:107). However imagining that what we are reading means something does not guarantee correct understanding. *We must also use reason. Imagination is too unreliable.* That is, *if* imagination and reason are separated in the same way as we think the body and mind are, “[m]aybe imagination is the through thread to reason---or what we ‘imagine’ reason to be” (Phillips personal correspondence 2006).

We need to combine all our faculties to correctly *investigate the surface* or accurately interpret what we see, particularly when viewing dance performance. Watching without any expectation allows one sort of reading (perhaps predicated by cultural/personality factors), while prejudgment can bias our viewing unnecessarily, giving us another, perhaps overly flavoured critical reading. “The

reader helps to create the meaning of the text by bringing it to his or her experience, attitudes and emotions” (Fiske 1990:40). Additionally, an artist’s intention may be concealed and/or poorly realized, so the finished product might bear little resemblance to the intention and could be interpreted in many ways. Some say, like Balanchine that we should enjoy dance the way we enjoy “a garden of pretty flowers” (as cited in Foster 1986:21) and if dance is a largely kinaesthetic experience, then reading may be beside the point.

2. Understanding

Humans have opted to employ words as our primary means of communication and hence enable our understanding in general, of each other and the world around us. Having learned to speak, we then learn to read and write words. Ultimately we must then learn how to use words to communicate effectively. Graham Mc Fee says that to understand something we must

[l]ocate it within a complex relation of things that one already understands. So that if I understand all the other moves of chess pieces, it makes sense to explain the queen's move as compounded by the bishop's move (Mc Fee 1992:15).

For humanity, learning to communicate is not a once off, set in concrete for life process. We continue to learn throughout our lifespan, although our faculties may dim late in life. How we arrive at making any sense of our world involves "the study of the physiology of sensations at one extreme, and the philosophy of knowledge at the other" (Moore 1988:43). We employ our body and our mind to decipher the codes of facts and senses, concrete and abstract in what we experience. Between the two disciplinary terrains of physiology and philosophy lies the no man's land of dance, and dancers are verbally informed creatures.

The benchmark of human cognition is our flexible use, interpretation, and creation of a variety of human symbols (Acredolo and Goldwyn, cited in Bremner and Lewis 2005:48).

Linguistic language is an important communicative and cognitive invention and the *flexibility* we demonstrate in learning and communication throughout our lifespan makes us different to animals. According to Vygotsky, "private speech is the cultural tool for not only transferring cultural knowledge, but the building blocks for creating new knowledge" (Johnston personal correspondence 2006). It seems the use of language and learning goes hand in hand. All humanity communicates using words of one sort or another. But language is not just about communication:

Language is used for expression of thought, for establishing interpersonal relationships with no particular concern for communication, for play, and for a variety of other human ends (Chomsky 1988:38).

This may be where dance comes in. Dance may be part of Chomsky's "play" and hence not be about communication at all.

Psychologists often compare primates with young humans to judge intelligence and ability to learn but, beyond the first few years of life, few animals can compare with anything humans do intellectually (Chomsky 1988). The similarities between man and chimpanzee and the comparisons that can be made regarding language, for example, don't hold true after about the age of three. The fact that we speak and that "speech plays an essential role in the organization of higher psychological functions" (Vygotsky 1978:192) means we can only compare pre-verbal developmental behaviour with other animals. Even then, psychologists argue that we are different beasts because of our capacity for speech. We learn to speak, in tandem with physical development, because we have a brain that allows us to do so. Humans have a different destination developmentally to other animals and that destination is again a negotiation between potential and practice. Calvin (1997:15) says that rather than being just highly programmed (like animals) we are highly versatile flexible and creative. This creativity means we are open to finding meaning in different ways. Relating this idea to evolution, Calvin calls the process 'evolving a good guess'. Calvin refers to psychologist Stanley Coren when he claims that with extensive training dogs and monkeys can demonstrate a level of receptive language (but without syntax or grammar) equivalent to a human child up to age 30 months (Calvin 1997:17). Animals also develop action and perception, body and mind as inseparable partners. But comprehension is quite different to creating novel utterances. While animals also use the body to speak, with some vocalizations, facial expressions, and body language:

The main difference (apart from language) is that men incorporate these basic signals into more complex social acts, where there is cognitive control and can be some modification of the NV elements.....For

example, smiling may be used as part of a strategy of ingratiation, rather than to reflect pleasure or liking (Argyle 1975:364).

Clever animals can do a similar thing, for example a dog may roll over to expose their soft underbelly and show it to be no threat to a superior dog. Gorilla's show submission with demure posture and downcast eyes, much as do human's when dealing with royalty. If you grin at a gorilla he might kill you, because showing teeth in gorilla language is an act of aggression.

People also have strategies to define pecking order but this is primarily established with words as well and, unlike gorillas with less biting of subordinate's bottoms. Also, while animals *respond immediately to stimuli* (Argyle 1975) *without much rational processing*, **we** are highly versatile; flexible and creative. Once again this creativity means we are open to finding meaning in different ways.

Human communications, verbal and nonverbal, are partly the product of cognitive processes, are directed towards long-term goals, and depend in a complex way on the nature of the situation and its rules (Argyle 1975:364).

We also share similarity with animals regarding courtship rituals, but:

Animal rituals are the product of biological evolution, while the human rituals are mainly the product of cultural development – though there may be biological universals behind the standard structure of rites of passage. Other human rituals, such as those for expression of religious beliefs, appear to have no animal equivalent (Argyle 1975:366).

Humanity can do novel, creative, or even strange things with its language. Even with practice, an animal without the facility for speech will never speak. We are different from all other animals by virtue of our creativity.

Evolutionary theory tells us that intelligence is a survival mechanism, and that one of the best measures of intelligence is language (Calvin 1997:10). But there is a creative aspect to intelligence that is unique to humanity (Calvin

1997:11), and that is acknowledged through the use of language: “human beings, mythologically created by the word, have forever relied on the creative value of the word” (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:2). Regarding the *special* intelligence of humanity, Seitz reports on studies claiming that:

[T]he endpoint of any intellectual activity is always some movement, action or activity (Montessori, 1949/1967). Indeed, movement occupies a central position in human cognitive activity (Laban, 1966). To be sure, it has been recently proposed that there is an elaborate information-processing system involved in movement with extensive bi-directional pathways to parallel systems in the brain that are involved in planning, reasoning, and emotion (Leiner, Leiner, & Dowq in Seitz 2000:4).

It seems there is indeed a link between thinking and doing. We also *think* physically in the way our body communicates and interacts with others: “if voluntary muscles are directed by our will, our thought, then they function as an organ of the mind” (Seitz 1993:3). Because we send verbal messages through the body “using vocal tract and bodily movements and positions” (McArthur 1998:249), we are able to read in both verbal and nonverbal ways. What we deliver we can receive. Animals however lack verbal means, and have to make decisions based on what they see or can read from circumstances without the assistance of language. One animal alone, confronted by another animal, has to decide, or decipher (without verbal clues) before it knows whether to engage, ignore, attack, or escape from another animal, what species it is, if it is friendly, what sex it is, what position in the animal hierarchy it might occupy, and all this must be done quickly or it might be attacked (Carpenter as cited in Watzlawick 1976:35). This sensitivity that animals seem to have to mood or nonverbal information, also called intuition, is what humanity often struggles with perhaps *because we have words*.

In arts practice, it seems we make a leap into nonverbal communication to explore an intuitive realm where logic meets imagination (Calvin 1997:16). Perhaps between logic and illiteracy is this place, *outside of language* where

humanity seeks solace and meaning in a combination of verbal and nonverbal interrelationships?

Words

But, in daily communication with others, words are what we consciously use best. Language is an important invention that we might be lost without. We *can* say some things very clearly without words, using gestures for simple expressions, commands and requests (go there, stop, listen, wait), but the myriad embodied messages are beyond the conscious control of the everyday practitioner of natural language. That is, the way we *synergistically* combine verbal and nonverbal is difficult to manufacture. When we communicate pragmatically (e.g. when we ask for something), we are most familiar with words. But surrounding the words are a number of things that modulate and make many different messages possible.

In their conceptual sphere, they [words] are at once containers, tools, and weapons, just as in the physical world a bag is a container, a screw-driver is a tool, and a gun is a weapon. They can serve simply for communication, but are equally likely to be used (in sharp focus) for negotiation, manipulation, domination, argument, and assault. They can do their work consciously, with the full panoply of rhetoric and suasion, or they can do their work without our conscious intent, when we use words as if we were the puppets of our social and ethnic groups. And in doing all this they benefit from a backlog of millennia in which people around the world have admired and stood in awe of the professions of the word: the shamans, genealogists, priests, gurus, and magicians; the teachers, actors, playwrights, and novelists; the philosophers, logicians, lawyers, journalists, and critics- all of whom demonstrate every day what words can be made to do and can make us do (McArthur 1998:38).

So, words can be “vexatious and versatile entities” (McArthur 1998:41). We cannot normally *choose* to communicate in things other than words. We generally need words to get things done, as a result of both the human propensity for language and our dependence on it. Unlike animals: “We do not simply inhabit our bodies; we literally use them to think with” (Seitz 2000:1). We

demonstrate how we are *always* verbal creatures, even when we move, when we lose our car keys.

Your facial muscles register frustration as you ask a family member for help, using your motor articulatory apparatus - that is, your vocal tract - to wonder aloud, "Now where did I leave those keys?" At some point, you throw up your hands in disgust as you recognize the futility of your search. Finally it dawns on you that you probably left your keys in the car. You saunter outside, delighted to retrieve them.

In every case, movement or action of the body ran parallel with thought and emotion. You scratched your head while thinking, calculated with your fingers as a kind of bodily abacus, followed your thoughts on foot from room to room, expressed your feelings through facial and bodily gestures and vocal intonation, and communicated your thoughts through your voice. Activity or motion always accompanied thought and emotion (Seitz 2000:1).

Seitz asks if we therefore think with the body. I wonder if we can do anything else? I don't think there is such a thing as a nonverbal body, unless we talk about animals, which lack spoken language, or pre-literate children. Only our early gestures prior to language tell a story beyond language. They are true mimesis or are pragmatic (e.g.: "I want") more than poetic expressions. But embodying our thoughts is different from trying to tell a story with our body in dance. While we may always be verbal bodies, movement is not firmly connected to meaning the way words are. Each *situation* helps us make sense of what we see a human do with the body, not the movement alone. Although pre-literate infants may be the exception to this rule.

[U]nintentional, more impetuous emotions are expressed before intentional communication. In other words, gestures that unconsciously appear are considered among the most primitive forms of information conveyed through human body as the medium, directly connected to human emotions (Sakata et al 2004).

It is only in these first years of communication, or in some unconscious (impetuous) actions, that nonverbal communication does not have a verbal framework to support it.

“[D]eictics” (pointing gestures), “emblems” (gestures which have a direct verbal translation as in “bye-bye”), and “gives” (i.e., hands outstretched) *arise prior to spoken language and do not display these coordinated links to speech development. [Author’s emphasis]* Indeed, gestural imitation of adults is unaffected by accompanying language at the earliest stages of lexical development in infants 13 to 16 months. Infants will ignore a linguistic cue if it conflicts with a modeled gesture in later stages (Seitz 2000:23).

It is not until children have language (natural language – the language of their birth, that usually of their parents) or have learned how to use this skill, that their gestures become less iconic, more metaphorical and hence linked to language. Their mind is already soft wired to link verbal and nonverbal signals, and practice firmly establishes the hard wiring.

[T]he earliest gestures are depictive (e.g., a one-year-old child slowly opening and closing her mouth to represent analogous movement of a matchbox), deictic (i.e., pointing, showing, and giving), and enactive or recognitory gestures (e.g., pretending to comb the hair), followed closely in age by expressive (e.g., knitted brow) and instrumental (e.g., extending arms to be picked up) gestures (Bartin, Bates et al in Seitz 2000:24).

These earliest gestures are not dependent on language but simply represent a physical (and perhaps therefore a universal human) need and, at least for the child making the gesture, do not have a corresponding verbal command that could accompany it because there is no word symbol in their brain as yet. I wonder if once we know how to use words as individuals, or have words as a society, we almost have no choice about their use? We have a thinking feeling body, linked biologically and philosophically to the mind, and the universal currency of the mind is words.

Nonverbal Sensitivity

While it is difficult to unravel psychological development, studying the human in situ can tell us many things about how we operate once we have words. After many years of experience, it seems we can develop interpersonal

communication into, “a form of shorthand when you know somebody well. There are many things you don’t need to say, since the other person senses what you’re going to say or do.” (Judi Dench speaking about working with Maggie Smith on the movie *Ladies in Lavender*).

Nonverbal language works best in interpersonal relationships between people who know each other well and have already established a dialogue. Outside of intimate relationships, however, both nonverbal and verbal communication can be fraught with difficulty. Using words when sending an email to a stranger for example, we are aware of how careful we must be to give the correct message. Using capital letters can be interpreted as shouting. Sending the same email to someone who knows us well is, in practice, much simpler, because they can refer the written message to what they know of us in conventional conversation.

Like words, some physical conventions such as the ‘comfortable’ distance between strangers, differs from culture to culture (Watzlawick 1976:7). In heavily populated Singapore, the personal space on public transport is unbearable for Australians used to a little more space. In the animal world, we see hard-wired behaviour, not conventions, with no room (or desire) for improvisation. Bees, creatures with a non-verbal body, are born with a dance language that communicates the location of nectar, but only to other bees that ‘speak’ the same language. Bees of the same species but of other colonies have slightly different dialects and hence Austrian and Italian crossbreeds would speak one or the other dialect, giving the wrong directions to a bee of the other dialect (Watzlawick 1976:5). If you get too close to animals of some species you’ll get bitten. Humans usually give a verbal warning before biting.

But if words are so good, why do we need nonverbal signals? Pease suggests that our nonverbal communication demonstrates links to the time before we had language. “[S]haking hands is a relic of the caveman era. Whenever cavemen met, they would hold their arms in the air with their palms exposed to show that no weapons were being held or concealed” (Pease

1981:32). African tribesmen in Baden Powell's experience shook hands with the left hand as they held their spear and shield in their right hand when not ready for battle (Scout's rule book 1997:3).

The modern form of this ancient greeting ritual is the interlocking and shaking of the palms.... Yet when Captain Cook made this gesture (the modern handshake) he was promptly killed by the Fijian natives who thought it an aggressive gesture (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:113).

According to McArthur, to make sense, language requires: "technology, technique, and content" and these three things are essential "interlocking components in any representation and presentation of knowledge for any purpose" (McArthur 1998:248). He says that we 'pour' language into either oral or graphic mediums and the "linguistic message" is then organised and sent in a particular way.

A simple example of this is the part that intonation plays in speech: the closest correlate to this on paper or screen is punctuation and layout, and that is far from close. There is in fact no *content* without some kind of *vehicle*, and each vehicle affects content in its own way. A message 'incarnated' in speech is not the same as one incarnated on clay tablet, paper, or screen; the medium may not be the message, but it certainly affects it (McArthur 1998:249).

And so a message (content) incarnated on a physical body (vehicle) or bodies is greatly influenced affected/effectuated by the incarnation. A person, quietly and voicelessly standing still can say many things depending on the context and on conventions regarding standing still. We might read, or understand something about a particular person by *how* she is standing, or *where* she is and *why* she is dressed. When she speaks, she says something, albeit complete nonsense if she chooses to, or if the theatrical design demands it be so.

Movement can be seen either as a universal language, a foreign language, and/or a private code or a combination of all three, and interpreting gestures accurately is like learning a foreign language. "[T]hat is each person

uses body movement somewhat idiosyncratically, thus conveying meanings that are unique to him or her," while at the same time we use universal conventions and rules unconsciously (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:114). This allows us to make sense even with our individually flavoured gestures.

Seitz says that our body may help us think, as we use our physical senses the same as thought processes (Seitz 2000:25). My 9 year old son bangs his hand on his forehead to help him get his thoughts correct, and similarly I furrow my brow when staring at the computer screen trying to compose something clever, or just lucid.

Indeed, gestures that accompany language may facilitate thought itself. For example, people speaking on the telephone routinely gesture even though it plays no obvious role in communication. Similarly, blind speakers when speaking to a blind listener will gesture even though such behaviour does not depend on either an observer or on an adult model (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 1998 cited in Seitz 2000:25).

Again it would seem that a blind speaker, like a pre-literate child uses gesture unconsciously, or as a learnt skill of which someone blind from birth would have no need. So gesture it seems is something hard-wired into our communication and is in fact an integral part of natural language. When we talk person to person without an electronic interface, we unconsciously include gesture to accompany the text, even when we are not being watched (e.g. talking to the driver in the back seat of a car). That is, it seems we gesture whether it will help us be understood or not. We gesture not only out of habit but because our body (and our mind) is hard-wired, programmed, and/or built to communicate in this way.

Pease says that a *well-trained person* should be able to predict gestures simply by listening to vocal cues. Birdwhistell, for instance, learned to tell what language a person was speaking by watching their gestures (Pease 1981:7). And these gestures, which we use everyday, once programmed and relegated to the lower parts of the brain (Sakata et al 2004:428) occur for the large part

unconsciously. In fact if the gestures become conscious they are apt to fall out of congruity with the message, like when (if) we lie. We do not know where to look, because our body automatically wants to hide in shame. When we have a hunch or gut feeling that someone has told us a lie, we really mean that their body language and their spoken words do not agree (Pease 1981:7).

Perception," it has been recently said, "may be regarded as primarily the modification of an anticipation." It is always an active process, conditioned by our expectations and adapted to situations. Instead of talking of seeing and knowing, we might do a little better to talk of seeing and noticing. We notice only when we look for something, and we look when our attention is aroused by some disequilibrium, a difference between our expectation and the incoming message. We cannot take in all we see in a room, but we notice if something has changed (E.M.Gombrich as cited in Calvin 1997:33).

Verbal and nonverbal are married in the human body. But yes, divorce occurs not infrequently, and often in dance the relationship likewise becomes dysfunctional. Usually gesture, that is nonverbal language, stays married to verbal language. Dance comes between this happy couple and breaks up the marriage.

Police forces often deal with people who lie and part of their training is to be involved with role-play to gain experience in the conscious control of nonverbal communication. But according to Argyle (1975:366), it is still an inexact science, as "professional experience does not necessarily produce sensitivity." Therefore, if we learn nonverbal communication by trial and error as we develop, and practice does not guarantee ability to decode nonverbal communication (Argyle 1975:369), then it seems it may be easier to "fake it" than to tell when someone is faking it. The difficulty is telling decisively whether someone's motivation is truthful, and this is why movies theatre and dance are intriguing and entertaining. The performers are acting! Director and script and experience have decided their motivation, and if they are good at it, we'll believe them. Maybe dancers can deceive an audience into seeing narrative. Likewise, in watching cartoons and even silent movies, we understand them because we are

aware of the rules, according to the specific tradition. Silent movies used words and dramatic music to explore dramatic concepts theatrically but without words. Buster Keaton's, or Barishnikov's movement alone would not have provided a narrative without the cooperation of circumstances or the verbal prompts.

Film directors talk about the *Kuleshov* effect, where a scene is affected by what is placed before and after consecutive frames. They say that a *preceding incident* and a *present circumstance* is all that *good* actors need to make the most of a scene (Prince 1992:59). These two factors do a lot of the work for the audience and actors alike. We relate to what has come in the scene immediately before and what the situation is, and then look to the actor's performance in that light. The actor cooperates with what we expect from our understanding of the scene. Our anticipation is modified by the performance.

The movie *Memento* is a good example of how disruption of narrative confuses us and yet is interesting, for some, to watch. The scenes in *Memento* are not presented chronologically, so the character's motivations are hidden from us as a result of the disruption of the linear narrative. It's confusing to see actions divorced from what stimulated them. We usually depend on the context of a scene to make sense of both the verbal and nonverbal information. When the scenes do not follow chronologically it is difficult to understand why the characters relate in the way they do. We have not seen the preceding scene (that is chronologically speaking) and so we don't know why the characters relate the way they do and the nonverbal information is not enough to tell the narrative. In retrospect, knowing that the scenes have been shown out of order, the film makes sense, but would not do so without the words. If we were to watch the movie without the words we would not have a clue, because not only would we try to interpret the nonverbal information, we would also be at a loss to explain the interactions, as the usual relationship rules of cause and effect are disrupted. But the scenes viewed in isolation might make sense, because film generally shows characters relating to each other and communicating in ways that we are

accustomed to read. “In film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical: the sign of the cinema is a short-circuit sign” (Monaco 2000:5).

Contemporary dance however is not as easy to translate as film. Disrupting our anticipation by disordering the sequence of events also occurs through the cut and paste of contemporary choreography. And even when scenes follow each other sequentially, combinations of movement phrases usually follow aesthetic, more than narrative considerations. T

As well the movement vocabulary that exists today in dance is so eclectic and idiosyncratic that it seems impossible to say that we understand what the work is ‘saying’ with a particular closed reading. When speaking about a dance work saying something, it is more a case of the work cooperating with something familiar conceptually and we fill in the gaps with what we understand, or want to imagine or anticipate about the subject.

In choreographic work that purports to be about something, it is necessary to frame the movement with enough information to make some sense. Calvin has a nice analogy for how imperfect nonverbal communication is and hence why contextual framing is so necessary:

People don't realize how much information is conveyed by the tone of voice and body language..... ..If you read today's newspaper headline to your dog in the same tone of voice, and with the same glances and postures, as you use to ask him to fetch your slippers, it might work just as well in evoking the desired behavior.....

In many cases, there isn't much to confuse the dog. The setting itself (people, places, situations, objects present) provides most of the information the dog needs to respond appropriately to a command (Calvin 1997:16).

If actors' words don't cooperate with their body language, the performance might not make sense. Likewise choreographers approximate tone of voice (or para verbals, and music) glances and postures (choreography, movement) setting (lighting, scene) to communicate - not a request or command, but an idea or emotion, and sometimes a narrative. For example in a romantic ballet – ‘go on Prince, good boy, fetch the Princess’. An audience generally has to *evolve a good guess* about the meaning of a

work even if there is an accompanying narrative (in whatever form - program notes, musical accompaniment, storyline, title of work etc). The movement has to be first written by the choreographer and inscribed on the dancers. It is impossible for an audience to truly be literate, especially when the dancers themselves are virtually illiterate, and not because dancers are not intelligent. Rather, the movement's meaning is usually quite arbitrary or based on aesthetic and compositional concerns subservient to and dependent upon the choreography. The original intention of a work can of necessity (through the choreographic process) become quite diffuse or confused in the creative process. Dance might never make complete sense, in a verbal or logical way, like a narrative film, because movement does not fully replace spoken language. They are different beasts. But like in film, when the story is told not just with words, but with the aid of the contexts of music and set and scene and lighting, dance provides another way to view an idea.

Our everyday communications need verbal and nonverbal language delivered together to make sense. Dance, however separates verbal and nonverbal, and often perverts their relationship such that contemporary dance can be both abstract and literal, making the reading of dance quite complex, or haphazard. In dance, the signifiers are sometimes the same as the signified and, at other times, very far removed, un-related or un-motivated. In a ballet, a man, not a member of royalty in real life, portrays the prince. In a contemporary work, a man can be portrayed by a man, although in Martha Graham's, *American Document*, the all-female company portrayed the "universal humankind", before Erich Hawkins came on stage, and afterward the women "reverted to the particular and he became the universal" (Morris 1996:vi). An audience member at a performance of *American Document* may have been terrifically entertained, but not at all aware of the information that could be mined from the dance.

The impact of dance is dependent not only on learning and knowledge, but also relies on "the direct and self-explanatory impact of perceptual forces upon the human mind" (Rudolph Arnheim cited in Hanna 1979:38,39).

Dance impacts upon audience members in different ways because of choreographic design.

Some contemporary choreography focuses the audience's attention on the highly kinetic physicality of dancing bodies, minimizing the cultural differences between dancers by highlighting their common physical technique and ability to complete the often strenuous movement tasks (Albright 1997:4).

Maybe dance is meant to be watched and enjoyed at whatever level the audience chooses, while reading dance is for academics or for recalling what has occurred after the fact. When we watch, is there too much going on to allow visceral reaction and critical processing at the same time?

Siegel speaks about the experience of observing dance as "fundamentally intuitive, visceral and preverbal. Only later do we bring words, categories, systems to rationalize what we've experienced. If a dance doesn't suggest meaning by its performance, no amount of intellectualizing can put meaning into it (Siegel 1992 as cited in Morris 1996:iv,v).

With the sophisticated development of language, we have moved further away from understanding messages that are communicated non-verbally, although at a subconscious level we understand too well what we are shown by advertisers who want us to buy their products. While we can be made aware of and control our gestures, like our breathing when we relax, gesture usually occurs not just habitually, but unconsciously. Whether we are aware or not of the intervention, we use body language to sell our ideas or ourselves. Dance, as body language however, is not as readily understood as the spoken word because it is *written* in a language that is either archaic (or has fallen into disuse through ignorance, or over-dependence on verbal forms) or that not everyone has the innate ability to read. And so in a way, growing a big brain or having words at our disposal, means we are less sensitive and have less ability to communicate nonverbally. Either way, we don't have nonverbal communication so readily at our disposal. We are clearly affected by nonverbal information, but are not so dependent upon awareness of it in everyday communication. It seems

we know what we do but not necessarily *how* we do it. Perhaps when our thoughts take flight with words, semiotics and the attendant philosophies are lacking in regard to explaining what we take for granted. As ritual helped traditional societies to make sense, theatre may be part of a contemporary discourse that explores what we do. And perhaps that is why we make dances, write poetry and music?

Now we have words, and having words necessitates making space in the brain and shedding some non-verbal skill. Each day we inevitably encounter combinations of verbal and nonverbal material. Finding meaning is an active process requiring “dynamic interaction between sign interpretant and object” (Fiske 1990:46). And this meaning is transmitted through a fleshy corporeal interface. But is one superior? Can we do without the body and rely on words alone, or do they work best together in this dynamic interaction?

3. Verbal Signification.

We need words to understand, that seems clear. But how is it that we use words?

Humans live in worlds they create through communication, verbal and nonverbal. Because human creatures have a particular kind of body and nervous system, a large number of potentials are available to them. But each individual is born into a particular culture that selects and develops a small number of these potentials, rejects others, and is unaware of many (Hanna 1979:242).

One of these potentials is language. A system of signs so complex that semioticians argue that it is not possible to do what we do in communication. Saussure, focused on the arbitrary nature of human language (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:3), that is, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is “determined by convention, rule, or agreement between the users” (Fiske 1990:52). Accordingly there is no categorical or necessary meaning in language because “the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary” and “language is particularly well suited to demonstrate this” (Ruthrof 2000:22). If words are meaningless schemata, then “...in this sense language is empty and makes no sense at all” (Ruthrof 2000:21). Ironically, semioticians use somewhat cryptic terms like motivation, constraint and signification to personify signs and tease out how we find meaning. “The more motivated a sign is, the more its signifier is constrained by the signified” (Ibid). For example, a cartoon of a man is less motivated and constrains less, or has less of a relationship than a photo of a man does with the actual man. Because the degree of motivation and constraint of the signifier determines how closely related the signified is (Fiske 1990:52), “A picture bears some direct relationship with what it signifies, a word seldom does” (Monaco 2000:158). We know the convention of the stick figure signifying man on a door means public toilet for males. The less motivated a sign is the more we have to learn the conventions, or else the sign is “liable to wildly aberrant decoding” (Fiske 1990:56). Strangely, “An unmotivated, arbitrary sign is the word MAN itself” (Ruthrof 2000:22), but we usually understand which man because we know the conventions surrounding words and the context in which they occur.

Gary Shapiro (1974) argues that semiotic theories are deficient insofar as they are unable to give an account of the way a sign is representative of the object. Meaning usually depends on context: indeed, some scholars argue that all meanings are situational (Hanna 1979:44).

Hanna again observes that “some linguists argue that semantics and syntax may not be separable, that is meaning is inherent in the rules of combination” (Hanna 1979:46). This suggests a malleable relationship which changes constantly depending on circumstances. Given the varied and sometimes contradictory semiotic points of view and also the subtle relationship between nonverbal communication, text, and performance – how we communicate in performance is also arguably incomprehensible. However, even very abstract installations, or a piece of text describing an experience of the installation *can* move a reader to tears *if* read in a particular way (Fraser 2006:37). We *can* successfully discuss abstract or religious ideas and philosophically debate pros and cons of hypothetical paradigms using words. And daily communication, while fraught with semiotic complexity, can be incredibly effective.

However, even ballet vocabulary is pretty poorly motivated, in the semiotic sense of the word, and yet audiences *believe* they have been communicated a story. For example in a romantic ballet, which has a relatively strict vocabulary, the conventions (linking a gesture to an idea for example) are not applied to the ballet steps themselves. A ballet step is both part of a training regime and then a stylised movement with a particular aesthetic. Dance training involves making the body as articulate as possible in any given style or technique. However dance technique class is not about exploring the meaning of movement, but rather the *skill* of the movement. An arabesque for example originally resembled a flourish in written Arabic, but has little relationship with the *meaning* of any gesture or symbol in human language. On stage we love to watch incredibly articulate individuals perform, but the body does not explicate or expound the way words do. A flexible body can astound but unless, like words, the movement is “systematically linked” to language (Ruthrof), then the movement will always be

open to interpretation. A dance step, like a word can be used in many different ways to provide a dynamic interaction. Whether the step has any meaning is arguable.

William Forsythe calls ballet a “nice neutral language” (Kirchner as cited in Jackson 1999:110) that he can combine at will in a variety of ways without considering if a step has a particular meaning, or whether relationships within a work follow an externally imposed narrative. Regarding Forsythe’s *Steptext* Jennifer Jackson says:

It is difficult for the reader to settle into following the linear development of one partnership within the ballet. Instead, threads lead outside the ballet into a social world that resonates not with a romantic ideal, but with the gritty reality of a contemporary society, to tension between the genders, to dangers in sexual relations, to both fear and trust and – implicitly – to the interdependence of opposites, within the self as in partnerships (Jackson 1999:124).

In both a romantic classic like *Swan Lake*, and a Frankfurt Ballet presentation, the ballet vocabulary is the basis of the stylized movement that propels the dancers through the space. A *jeté*, a term to describe a leap in dance (which literally translates to ‘a throw’ in the original French) could be used to express any of a number of emotions as well as simply being a virtuosic display designed to give kinaesthetic empathy to the audience or accompany the accent or rhythm of the music. While *Swan Lake* assumes a particular reading of a ‘set’ narrative. contrastingly “Forsythe’s works always raise questions that indicate the potential for the reader to take a multiplicity of interpretive stances” (Jackson 1999:106). Forsythe’s rational approach to this neutral language becomes an aesthetic, both through the manoeuvring of his imagination, and the reader’s imagination. By focusing on the movement itself and the rearrangement of ballet vocabulary, paradoxically Forsythe shows us that the meaning is not found in the movements.

The kind of post-structuralist and postmodernist devices that he employs engender analytical detachment and emotional disengagement, while simultaneously generating viscerally rich ballet that the reader can almost touch and feel (Jackson 1999:115).

What generates the viscerally rich experience? How is a Forsythe audience excited? It is not the steps themselves, but rather, like the words in a poem, it is the way the steps are combined with the music, costume and lights, and then the reception by a thinking, feeling person that make the difference. I hold to the argument that dance itself communicates sensation more than content. Or perhaps the content of dance is sensation?

According to early postmodernists (Cage Cunningham et al), the reader of a dance work makes all the meaning happen. So even if Forsythe planned to “engender...emotional disengagement”, the reader might want to be moved emotionally, and succeed in seeing drama and hysterics in the combination of the neutral steps. It is possible, with practice, to analyse and not be emotionally involved, but in attempting analysis one can still be seduced by the work such that emotional engagement occurs. Analytical detachment is also not all or nothing. I remember watching Forsythe’s *Enemy in the Figure* for the first time and being excited and put on edge by the energy of the work. And while I understand the structure of the work and the improvisational style of some of the movement (I performed the work in 1992 with Leigh Warren’s Australian DanceTheatre), I am emotionally drawn in by it. I have no idea what it is about! Or rather, I’ve come to understand more about both Forsythe’s creative approach and my own aesthetic palate, and yet am still moved by both the athleticism and the aesthetic sense resulting from the staging of his works.

One performance of *Enemy in the Figure* by The Australian Dance Theatre in 1992 in Adelaide was disrupted by a foreign dancer who, believing Forsythe’s work was about the philosophical and accidental relationship between architectural forms sneaked on stage from the auditorium and joined (very skilfully and in costume) the cast on stage and posted, in a very Lutheran way, a

document on the set. He was eventually removed but the audience was none the wiser. This could not happen in a romantic ballet. A second prince would be noticed and mess up the story.

The Merce Cunningham work, *Winterbranch*, which was based on the idea of bodies falling, was performed in different countries and interpreted very differently by each culture (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:92). Swedes said it was about race riots, Germans about concentration camps, Britains about bombed cities and Japanese about the atom bomb. The wife of a sea captain said it was about shipwrecks (Ibid). The authors ask and I concur: "If even a basic action like falling lends itself to so many different interpretations, imagine what different meanings a subtler and more complex movement must carry" (Ibid). Fiske also believes that "Signs with no conventional dimension, are purely private and thus do not communicate" (Fiske 1990:56). More complex movements like those found in dance vocabulary usually have no conventional dimension, even if the movement may be recognizably part of our everyday body language, like for example a run across stage.

For communication to be most effective, there should be shared knowledge about the form and familiarity with its use; shared notions about when, where, how and why messages are sent; and information sufficiently lucid to be perceived through distractions or impediments (Hanna 1979:39).

In the dance context for example "where the participants, dancers and observers, share semantic codes" (Hanna 1979:39), a convention or a framework for interpretation has to be established first, allowing meaning to be communicated. Also we bring to a reading of a dance work all our biases. While a contemporary work, or for that matter a ballet work has a vocabulary that is quite arbitrary or private, the vocabulary still seems to communicate, albeit with aberrant, or very open decoding, depending on how motivated the vocabulary, and how biased the reading.

We cannot enjoy knowledge without having prejudices, for both come from the same source, that is, our capacity to turn a motion into a symbol, to transform an individual action into a class of actions which, based on our past experiences, we have learnt to treasure or despise (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:93).

How we respond to a dance work depends on how well related (or biased) we are to what the choreographer or culture says the work should mean, and also the kinaesthetic empathy that we feel when watching movement.

When the rules of communication are changed to give non-propositional meaning through abstraction or translation into another form, like dance, then “the shape of the message may be the primary meaning” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in Hanna 1979:38). In dance, the human body is given the task to communicate both the shape and the content of the message. As a result of the structure of post-modern contemporary creative processes, dance becomes a unique performance style *“[w]hose meaning is largely embodied in its relation with an audience and its dependence on bodies, rather than in the plot climax or story it tells”* (Goellner/Murphy 1995:83 *My Emphasis*). We have to (or want to) look at the bodies rather than formulate a narrative to make sense of the work. Bodies are hard to read because they are bodies, not words. While semioticians say that “communication is the generation of meaning in messages” (Fiske 1990:41), messages in dance can generate bizarre, aesthetic or alternate meanings. We can read some, but not all things we see around us. Human beings developed or have inherited language because bodies were unreliable transmitters of communication. In dance the attempt is made to speak through the body without spoken words. But because we focus on a verbal body constructed by conventions and codes there is *some* meaning to be found in the physical form. So Derrida may be correct in saying there is no such thing as the nonverbal body. But perhaps there is a nonverbal mind instead. For example, animals or infant humans do not use words because they cannot; the words haven’t arrived at a neural, practical or biomechanical level and so they use the body. They don’t know the rules of communication yet, and so can’t break any rules or play with

structures and expectations. Interpreting dance is like pre-literate non verbal communication in that we need experience of dance to be able to interpret dance. Trying to interpret physical messages from a tired or cranky infant can be very difficult, and similarly a tired or cranky choreographer! Once words arrive though it is not necessarily any easier. At least until we develop experience, skills and a vocabulary. I argue against a magical, illogical sort of *sensing* what someone means, but rather point to a sensitivity of understanding that develops over time and experience. According to Ruthrof: *“If we had not learned from earliest childhood, perhaps to some extent even prenatally, how to associate linguistic sounds with nonverbal materials, we would have no meaning”* (Ruthrof 2000:30). Most dance, and especially dance that occurs without linguistic sounds (or written text) to provide a context, lacks exactly that sort of meaning.

4. Words as language

We read and use verbal and nonverbal language systems in everyday communications because these systems bring meaning. And while humanity relies greatly on words to understand the world:

[T]he place of the word as an ultimate unit of language has not been easy to find, with the result that many twentieth century linguists have found it necessary to look elsewhere for key units of language: 'below' the word among phonemes and morphemes or 'above' it in sentence and discourse (Mc Arthur 1998:44).

After negotiating the linguistics rules/codes of communication, regardless of various theories and their ability to unwrap language, how we actually communicate with and without words is difficult to explain.

But all is not lost. Chomsky's 'universal grammar' "posits an innate knowledge of the principles that structure all languages" (De Boysson-Bardies 2001:3). Put simply, as I understand it, we begin life with ability for language but no skill, and then we grow into our words. "Even before the advent of speech, children use a variety of symbolic gestures to communicate with others" (Acredolo and Goldwyn cited in DeLoache 2005:48). As we grow we develop musculature, skill and neural connections. As a consequence of Chomsky's being wired for words, at the same time we develop creative ways to use words.

Regarding this process from thoughts to language Ruthrof says that "language needs nonverbal mental projections to mean at all. Uncontroversially, we could say that language consists of sounds in a certain syntactic order plus something else." Yet in a mysterious way, "to mean is to step outside of language" (Ruthrof 2000:25). We are able to make meaning despite the flaws and arbitrariness of language, and we do this in an almost magical way. In the stepping outside of language we are still drawn or held, like by an umbilical cord to the place we first and most consistently make sense. Words are the gravity that anchors us to meaning. We are connected to words like an astronaut

connected to the spacecraft, while venturing on a space walk. “[L]anguage tethers us to the world; without it we spin like atoms” (Lively as cited in Watson 2003:55). We are most at home with our feet firmly on terra firma, the ground of reason, though we enjoy being airborne and weightless at times. Dance may be a demonstration of our attempts to ‘step outside’ and deal with the ‘something else’.

The Power of Words

Given the interpretability of nonverbal signs, we need some clarity, so we use words to avoid misconception. “A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come across one of these intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt” (Mark Twain as cited in Watson 2003:73). Although it is true that legal writing, which tries to rule out ambiguity can result in language being made indecipherable – except of course to the legal artists who speak it! As our needs in communication become more sophisticated, from infancy to adulthood (as we seek to say more complex things, ideas, emotions, concepts), so the way we encode or transcribe becomes (of necessity or design) better defined. As the brain becomes more complex in a notional evolutionary sense and the verbal interaction increases, the vocabulary must keep pace with the complexity of the social interaction to provide clarity. In other words, ‘words’ reduce in order to be functional (Phillips 2006 personal correspondence). The way I communicate today is hopefully clearer than when I was a child, but reliant on a greater vocabulary and ability to think and express creatively, such that I can improvise and craft a response appropriately to a variety of situations.

When learning a new pattern, whether a math sequence or a dance phrase, one uses a great deal of space and wiring in the cerebral cortex. As the skill is practiced, it takes up less space in the cortex and is stored in the lower regions of the brain, where it can be used reflexively (Bradley 2001).

The first time we speak a word, we have to think how to frame the word with our lips and tongue, but once it is practiced we no longer have to think. Speaking becomes as unconscious as our heartbeat, but it is still incredibly skillful. The spoken word also has “nonverbal deictic additions” (Ruthrof 2000:24) that unconsciously make all the difference in clarifying how we are using our words. That is, what the context was, and what *connotation* we should give the words when we receive them. It may be true that a movement, like a picture is

[w]orth a thousand words, but if the object is to locate its functional equivalent in another context then perhaps one word is worth a thousand pictures if it contains the conceptual key (Vygotsky 2005:328).

Words, with their conceptual keys, it seems, “are best for communicating factual information” (Bolton 1987:79). Words are a fantastic invention, facilitating transfer of information both in personal discussion and also with masses of people all over the world through translation and electronic media. At the same time, according to McArthur:

Because of its many dimensions, the concept ‘word’ is more like a cluster than an atom.....On the level of practical activity, people ‘know a word’ not simply when they can use and understand a single item but when they know a range of variation and practices associated with it: know how to say hear read and write in various forms and extensions. So for example with the word “know” we can: use in phrases and sentences; relate the simple to the complex; relate these to compounds; use and grasp senses expressions and collocations.....

This cluster, with its clear centre and hazy periphery, shares semantic space with other clusters cited as the words *understand*, *perceive*, *grasp*, and *fathom*. All operate within a system whose size and complexity defy comprehensive description, but without being beyond the reach of the everyday user of the language (McArthur 1998:48).

So while I know how to use the word ‘know,’ other people may know many other ways to use the word, and know more efficient and/or precise uses than I have mastered. We are able to improvise our speech each day as a result of having this large vocabulary at our disposal; much like jazz musicians can improvise. The word is a powerful tool.

Dance however cannot function with the clarity and poetry that words can. Stylistically we can improvise conversations between two dancers using dance but, even if dance vocabularies are standardised and practiced in a roughly similar way to a spoken language (with vocabulary and syntax), the meaning prescribed, or connoted to movement (if prescribed) is not consistent. According to Monaco:

A word alone on a page has no particular connotation, only denotation. We know what it means, we also know potentially what it connotes, but we can't supply the particular connotation the author of the word has in mind until we see it in context (Monaco 2000:162).

Dance lacks a basic unit of meaning, like the word, (or even a letter) which could transfer from studio to studio, work to work, era to era *and* make sense to other dancers or spectators. An unmoving shape like a word alone on a page may *attempt* to represent an idea. But in dance, the transitions, the movements between shapes would need either to mean or be ignored.

In alphabetic systems, spaces are now universal and as a result literate people learn to recognize 'words' as visual rather than auditory units. In a real sense, the first orthographers of a language make the decisions about how words are to be perceived in that language (McArthur 1998:44).

So, choreographers may be each respective generation's orthographers of dance language. While we do not separate out a unit of meaning, we do attempt to correlate movement with meaning. Hence we assume some semantic relationship between movement and words. It is not a perfect relationship though.

Movement used to express an idea in a particular choreographer's style or vocabulary cannot maintain the consistency found in 'natural' language (even if the text like the movement is quite neutral) because Cunningham, Graham or Tharp use the same movement in different ways in different works, with different meanings (or no meaning), to tell different stories (or no story). If we consider the

connotative abilities between linguistic languages, English and French for example, we find that French “makes up for its “limited” vocabulary with a noticeable greater use of connotation” (Monaco 2000:162). English language has a larger vocabulary and relies less on connotation, being able to denote meaning with more words. Nonverbal language more so with a very limited vocabulary likewise requires that we connote meaning much more than words. In this and other regards, dance is a specialised form of communication that does not share the characteristics of a linguistic language system.

Most dance vocabularies *are* therefore beyond the reach or at least the reading of the everyday user, unless we consider that the only everyday users are dancers, and even then we need to be specific about whose vocabulary, whose body we are talking about. We need both verbal and nonverbal together to overcome the difficulties we encounter when we “transform an individual action into a class of actions” so that we can discern a part of the ‘cluster’ and make sense.

Historically, before the creation of language, we assume that people communicated through a series of gestures and sounds. Before verbal language, body language (including facial expressions) was speculatively the main source of communication and the best relationship tool, outside of bribery with food. This is still seen in infants and lower animals (Vygotsky 2005:294) but once words arrive things change dramatically.

[T]he most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge (Ibid 295).

This convergence is essential for learning: educators argue that teaching dance movement to preschoolers is important because it aids the child in developing socially and acquiring the ability to organize and communicate thoughts and

feelings (Seitz 1998:5). There is argument about what the *nature* of the qualitative change with the acquisition of language entails (Cole 2005:350) but it does seem these converged skills (speech and practical activity), once established grow hard to separate later in life.

Regarding the processing of nonlinguistic material Ruthrof suggests that,

[w]hen we learn language as a part of social pedagogy, the community guides us to systematically link the sounds of language expressions with nonverbal sign complexes. For language to be meaningful, members of a speech community must be able to share, to a high degree, the way in which language and non verbal readings are to be associated with one another (Ruthrof 2000:33).

Considering dance as a part of a *social pedagogy*, and paraphrasing Ruthrof, members of a *dance* speaking community must be able to share to a high degree the way in which language (verbal meaning) and movement (non verbal readings) are to be associated. Gestures for example tend to have a duration that is linked to the words they accompany, or the intensity of the motivation of the idea. "It is nearly impossible to detect synchronization of gestures and speech in real time" (McNeill 1979:257). Gesture onset, peak and end are closely coordinated with words, clauses and concepts (Ibid), and this skill takes years of culture specific experience. Musicians speak of a gesture being a thematic part of a musical composition. The gesture unfolds over time. Similarly, a dance work might use gestures as a starting point to explore a theme, greed for example. But the choreography, like a musical gesture, takes time to unfold. Furthermore, it takes skill to understand. According to Metz:

[w]hen a language does not already exist, one must be something of an artist to speak it, however poorly. For to speak it is partly to invent it, whereas to speak the language of everyday is simply to use it (as cited in Monaco 2000:10).

Every dance work is, to an extent, a new language, that is *invented*, introduced, taught briefly, 'spoken' (and understood occasionally, or in

retrospect) for the length of the work (or the life of the creator) and then dies at the end of the performance, unless of course it is performed again, filmed or recreated/reinterpreted. The people who understand it best however are the performers and the creator, but the audience, who has mostly missed the teaching/learning of the language, must appreciate the dance in a different way. They are seeing and comprehending (or not) 'the language' for the first time, much as a child learning language sees a new animal and tries to put a name to it. The context and body language may give clues to what *they* (in performance *the dancers*) are talking about but the actual conversation is largely unintelligible. We might be given a translation of the conversation but without knowing the language ourselves we have to accept the translation as gospel. We cannot read a foreign language until it is no longer foreign, even if we know the alphabet. We might attempt to read, or translate, but without knowing the language well we have to guess the meaning. We do a crash course in a new language when we see a dance performance because it is not *the language of everyday*. How we combine effective facts with affective feelings to give meaning in dance is a complex and interdependent process.

Just as an individual's speech acts depend upon community linguistic practices, so do the individual artist's pictures reflect background visual practices (Gilmour 1986:52-53).

Gilmore suggests that art reflects symbols that are culturally meaningful and accessible to the community. Dance's movement vocabulary needs to be culturally accessible to the audience and semantically accessible for transfer of meaning. Similarly the dance work's ability to communicate will be dependent upon particular conventions, upon the skill of the choreographer to craft and load the movement with information, and the ability of an audience/culture to read the dance properly. It is difficult in Australia to make a semantic link between folk dance and our theatrical practice, so Australians in particular, and perhaps modern culture in general are disadvantaged in trying to read dance.

5. Movement as Language

Semioticians say we use bodily communication because there is a lack of verbal coding in some areas such as shapes, personality and much of interpersonal relations where, “words are not necessary, are not normally used, and are awkward and embarrassing when they are” (Argyle 1975:371). So we choose or find ourselves unconsciously using the body rather than words on *certain* occasions depending on circumstance. If we are aware of someone’s emotional state we might recognize that words will not bring comfort and then a hand on the shoulder or a hug will communicate compassion more eloquently.

Linguistic signs are always parasitic on nonverbal signification. No matter what expressions we use, if they are not spoken soothingly, they will not comfort (Ruthrof 2000:24).

How we say the words is essential to giving the correct or intended meaning, and likewise our gestures enhance the emotional meaning of our words. Considering interpersonal attitudes, nonverbal signals are more powerful than initially similar verbal ones and, as nonverbal signals are less well controlled, they are more likely to be genuine (Argyle 1975:361). Words do not always convey the truth about how someone feels and we depend on nonverbal cues for further evidence. Like the cluster idea with words, interpreting a solitary gesture in isolation can provide incorrect information, as gestures also “come in sentences” (Pease 1981:14) and must be ‘read’ in concert with other gestures as well as the words. It is the combination that brings meaning.

Gestures can emphasize, encourage, discourage, focus, berate, and in other words (again) do most things that words do. But gestures do not *replace* words terribly well. What makes sense of the gesture is the words that accompany it, but only rarely is the reverse true. Bolton confirms this tendency of body language in general stating that

[L]eading authorities claim that no gesture, in and of itself, has a specific meaning. No single motion ever stands alone. It is always part of a pattern and its meaning is best understood in context (Bolton 1987:84).

A gesture accompanying a verbal message is often superfluous (like when on the phone, and invisible to the receiver), but rarely is it essential to the meaning of the words. Not that gestures are always unnecessary or inefficient. I can still tell someone to wait by raising my finger (and eyebrows) while talking on the phone to someone else. A grimace is still worth several words as long as we know the context.

Sometimes nonverbal signals happen without us thinking because according to Argyle, firstly, it would be disturbing to focus attention on some signals or to make them too explicit and, secondly, the negotiation of social relationships is conducted nonverbally at the fringe of consciousness (Argyle 1975:361). Nonverbal cues of course are able to be controlled by skilled persons e.g. dancers actors, and also in certain cultures, “where there are strong conventions about looking pleasant” like in Japan and Britain (Ibid). Signals like pupil expansion and perspiration “can only be controlled by modifying the emotional state itself” (Ibid). Professional performers do this by imagining themselves in a similar emotional situation to that required by the performance.

So while we depend on words, we are still subject to our body’s unconscious physical communication, which is sometimes very clear and, at other times, very well disguised (Bolton 1987:88). Even without actor training we can approximate emotional states and communicate those states without words. We can pretend or bluff or be humble, even when we are not. For a performer, the extent to which the feeling of the work is communicated is dependent upon the performer’s ability to embody the appropriate emotional state. Torville and Dean danced passionate duets while leading separate, mutually exclusive private lives. In everyday life, we can also attempt to create a façade with our words, but

“our bodies usually blab the truth about our feelings” (Bolton 1987:80). We can try to hide what we are feeling but our emotions can overcome our amateurish attempts as we inappropriately burst into tears or laughter. Similarly we can use words to be what we are not. Unlike performers, we are not usually given preparation time to step into character in our everyday communications.

Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings – much harder than to say something fine about them which is not the exact truth (George Eliot as cited in Watson 2003:87).

What we take for granted is the holistic way we usually communicate in body and mind. So while it is possible that words like gestures alone can be at times confusing, words *usually* bring certainty, or can be made to do so. It is more difficult for gestures to work alone. Words however make complete sense by themselves, and also in combination with other words. Or rather, they *can* be used in such a way that they make complete sense. And, according to Pease, selected words with their accompanying gestures will do the job more efficiently and with less chance of incorrect interpretation than gestures ever could.

Observation of gesture clusters and congruence of the verbal and non verbal channels are the keys to accurate interpretation of body language (Pease 1981:15).

We control where the eyes look, but we cannot focus the ears. And this may also be why humanity tends historically, with the development of civilization, toward scribal rather than oral culture.

Human social behavior typically consists of verbal and nonverbal signals, and of a combination of two channels, auditory and visual. Most nvc is received visually; while sounds can be received whatever the position of the ears, visual signals depend on the visual channel being open, on the appropriate direction of gaze. This is why gaze is of central importance in human social behavior. It is a channel that becomes a very important social signal (Argyle 1975:366).

So *listening* to vocal cues *and* awareness of nonverbal signs is vital in interpreting what is spoken to us by/through the human body. Likewise what we see on stage in a play or a dance performance can be a complex take on natural language and our sensory systems need auditory and visual cues to make sense or provide a less open reading. We usually understand a love story even without word as there are many recognisable gestural clues.

In the emotional realm, however, the advantage is with body language.....Non-verbals not only portray a person's feelings, they often indicate how the person is coping with her feelings (Bolton 1987:79).

So perhaps we can say that body language or rather, in this case, dance is the language of emotions. Recursive-ness is a feature of *language*, that is, there is a generally consistent relationship between a word and an idea, which means that a great number of individual things can be contained by a word. So a *group* means a *group*, although it can be applied to different *groups* and might need to be clarified using adjectives or other defining words to say which *group*. And while dance has been *assumed* for many practitioners and audiences alike to have these features of language, e.g. codes, conventions, vocabulary and syntax (Foster 1986 preface), dance cannot be compared favourably to a linguistic language (McFee1992:121).

[I]f a speaker says, for example, *he is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave*, an explanation can be proposed that describes the processes involved in terms of sensory-motor speech programs combined with the extension of these concepts to the rest of the conceptual content. To explain, in addition, why this utterance was said at all we should consider the speaker's purposes-for example, self-congratulation. The same vocalization could have been produced for a totally different purpose by another speaker (for example, one who wanted to be ironic) (McNeill 1979:281).

In much post modern work meaning is actually deliberately blurred by the artist (perhaps also called translator) to invite multiple interpretations or a greater openness to poetic interpretation. This is not reducing, like words, but multiplying,

like a virus. When I see a particular dance company work, by a particular choreographer, I can know in advance what style of movement and what aesthetic to expect. But especially in contemporary dance, the *essence* of what is being performed/communicated is not only embedded in the movement vocabulary of the particular choreographer, but also in the idiosyncratic execution of that movement by the dancer. The movement vocabulary is beyond cultural expression, because contemporary movement vocabulary is often so idiosyncratic as to be outside of culture (or a unique expression within a culture – like a trope). To this end, we can examine dance as a result of both the choreographer's creative process, the conventions that compose the dance and also its time in history (Foster 1986 pg xix preface). The work of Akram Khan, an Anglo Indian choreographer, owes much to postmodernism *and* to classical Indian dance and can also claim influences of different choreographers/teachers. But Khan's work is also recognizably flavoured by his unique body and the idiosyncratic choices his mind makes, over and above his history. You cannot separate the man from his history, but in the making of a dance work, the greatest influence in the crafting of the movement is the choreographer.

It is not possible, to communicate the depth of information contained by words with movement alone. We can describe in detail how a movement looks and perhaps explore what it might mean. Concerning translation, we can translate a phrase from one language into another (Ricoy 2002), but: "it makes no sense to speak of constructing an exact equivalent for some work of art" (McFee 1992:118). Even translation between languages is suspect: "One suspects that whenever French theoretical metaphors are translated into analytical English, things go wrong" (Ruthrof 2000:27). But it is possible in one language to replace one word with another or translate one word into another language without losing or completely changing the meaning of that word. If dance is like language we need to consider transfer of meaning, and how we interpret that meaning, not just vocabulary or cosmetic similarities.

6. Translation

Our creative intelligence enables us to not just read but also interpret and translate our world. But translation theory says that we don't translate words, but rather we translate meaning. *Realidad* – a word meaning reality cannot become reality through translation, unless you remove some letters and insert some others, but the meaning of the two words reality and *realidad* could be considered the same. Movements, like words, obtain their reality from the meaning context in which they emerge (Ward as cited in Jackson 1999:110), but movement in isolation is similarly difficult to interpret. Just as movements emerge from a meaning context, they cannot be read except as part of that context. In isolation, they are abstract, arbitrary and meaningless. If I try ordering a pizza with dance steps, of either classical or post modern form I think I'd go hungry. Monaco suggests that "one seldom holds dialogues using film as the medium" (Monaco 2000:163). Using dance as a language, "like the non representational arts in general (as well as language when it is used for artistic purposes), is a one way communication" (Ibid).

When we consider dance, as a language, the content is greatly affected by the translation through the body. We are biased by many things to do with how we appreciate, (for want of a better word) another person's body. What means something to me and on my body may be quite different when used by another body even if, and again this is debatable, the movement had some precise meaning in the first place. The two arguments I equivocate between in considering dance as communication go something like this:

- It can be argued that like spoken language in which we experience communication breakdowns, nonverbal language (like dance) can also be mystifying or opaque. And conversely it is also arguable that "in principle, everything can be expressed in any language" because of "the existence of universal syntactic and semantic categories and endorsed by the logic of experience" (Ricoy 2002:110).

However, because it is texts (that is - *meaning*) and not languages (that is - *form*) that are translated (Ricoy 2002:111), it needs to be recognized that translation has its limits, in particular when considering texts which rely “very heavily on their own cultural context for their interpretation, or whose formal characteristics are essential for their comprehension” (Ricoy 2002:111). That is, dance is more form than content in general and always depends heavily on its cultural context, so any translation of dance will therefore struggle to make sense or will only be a very limited realization of the original intention to communicate. The work might appear strange to us or we might not ‘like’ it. The role of translation is to provide “transfer of meaning rather than as a vehicle for the reproduction of form” (Ricoy 2002:114).

A choreographer is similar to a good translator who can “erode that strangeness, consciously or subconsciously, in order to present their readers with naturalness of expression and enhance comprehensibility” (Ricoy 2002:109). But this does not mean that ‘a’ plus ‘b’ equals ‘c’ necessarily. “Because it carries the intriguing possibility of being both very abstract and very literal” (Albright 1997:3), dance has a perverse relationship to text that defies linguistic sensibilities and has the power to confuse - even in well crafted work. So, it resonates with me when I read reviews about contemporary dance work that say the work was *meaningless*.

Meaningless is a term which my thesaurus suggests also means: empty, worthless, hollow, pointless, futile, insincere, insignificant, unimportant, inconsequential, carrying no great weight, having no effect, and irrelevant (Windows XP Version UK English Thesaurus). So meaningless is one of a group of words including insincere, which in isolation does not do justice to a particular work (even if the work was meaningless). Meaningless, according to Adshead-Lansdale (and socio cultural theory), cannot be said about dance, suggesting instead that an “ambiguous text” has the ability to: “generate multiple meanings, meanings which differ in particular contexts” (Adshead-Lansdale 1999:19).

Without clues to the work at a verbal (or intellectual) level, it appears that a critic is easily lost and might desire less “creative ambiguity” and more “certainty” (Ibid). She may also have been lost while watching a folk dance if she knew little of the culture the dance came from, or of a ballet work if she knew little of ballet stories. She may have needed a translator to ‘erode the strangeness’ for her. But even then, the work may not have found a place in the reviewer’s heart, because while “translators create a meeting point where the otherness of the foreign text comes into contact with the receiving culture” (Ricoy 2002:109), this receiver/reviewer may still have found the otherness unpalatable.

And by translation I don’t mean simply turning the alphabet into movement. Text could (with some effort) be translated into a physical form, (or vice versa) so that a pose/movement represented a word to tell a particular story, perhaps like the way sign language for hearing impaired people represents words with movements or shapes.

This examination of the ‘steps’ as ‘text’ brings the linguistic emphasis of these theories into view, inviting analogies with sentences, syntax, paragraphs (Lansdale 1999:13).

But to read the work like a language, an audience would need a lot of help and the performers would be a select and wonderful few who could manage all the demands that the translation of a natural language would require. On top of this contingent translation, there are considerations of perception and processing.

The 1531 book by Sir Thomas Elyot used to educate the English ruling class “assumes a resemblance between the dance and a moral order” and the “dance, then, at the level of individual steps, could be seen as commenting on moral order” (Foster 1986:116). However, the movements discussed in Elyot’s book were made significant by a shared cultural understanding of the social order of the day:

Where the individual moves, such as the step forward or the holding of hands, resembled various virtues, the syntactic ordering of the moves demonstrated the harmonious relationship among those virtues (Foster 1986:117).

Without an understanding of the social practices of the day and the way they influenced body language, the movement of that time would not translate through time or across culture. The way we move today and the physical relationships we explore, as well as the way we see the world in relation to the body, make our writing of dances (choreography) unique to our time and place.

In a historical moment when the “body” is considered to be a direct purveyor of identity and is thus the object of so much intellectual and physical scrutiny, a moment when academics and scientists, as well as artists and politicians, are struggling to understand the cultural differences between bodies, dance can provide a critical example of the dialectical relationship between cultures and the bodies that inhabit them (Albright 1997:3).

A “step forward” today could mean anything. Dance, and especially contemporary dance is such a marginalized practice and has a very small audience. Our world is so specialized today. Contemporary dance in Australia is not becoming more popular, despite reality TV shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*. Contemporary dance can be very demanding on an audience’s ability to read or enjoy the performance. We need to employ perceptual abilities that differ from our everyday reading of the world, especially in choreography that abstracts nonverbal language, corrupts semantics, and reinterprets physical relationships between people.

Artistic perception seemingly involves a combination of rational and intuitive modes that produces neither a mystical nor an entirely logical process. The process can seem otherworldly, like when I am transported by art or a glass of great wine to another place and made to feel something which I can identify sensually but which I struggle to articulate in words. We experience art as feelings but discuss art, using words, in terms of theories, and *appreciate* art as a

negotiation between the head and the heart. Hence we are sometimes in a no man's land "between the cry and the silence" (Green as cited in Fraser 2006:1).

It is not possible to create an exact replica of an experience using words, nor is it desirable in most arts practice, and so we try to communicate on a variety of levels when we describe some phenomena. If the work really resonates with us then there may be reception that changes us at an emotional level and affects a physiological response that we then might attempt to process into words. Andrea Fraser (2006) writes evocatively about an architectural sculpture installation:

I can describe Fred Sandback's work as beautiful. I can talk about the way it brings space alive by creating shimmering virtual planes. I can talk about the way it makes me hum in empathy with the visual vibrations created by the yarn. I can talk about the feeling of calmness brought on by the precise perceptual focus his work requires. But why should these things make me weep? (Fraser 2006:37).

Fraser is able to answer the question "why" but it takes several thousand words to tease out the web of connections that move her to tears. Perhaps a shorter answer is that, for Fraser, the Sandback work is not viewed in isolation. "It's art that I love, and when I encountered it I wept" (Fraser 2006:37). She weeps ostensibly because of the work, but also as a result of what she feels about institutionalized art, of other works she admires or dislikes and because she may be a particular personality who weeps at art. Our weeping, like our understanding, is always contingent on context, convention and translation.

A great twentieth century choreographer, George Balanchine is described as making abstract ballets, but according to the *translation* by one commentator:

The movement may be tense or relaxed, abrupt or flowing, carefree or somber; and the ways the dancers move in space may suggest love or hate, attraction or repulsion (Anderson 1992:150-151).

So Balanchine's abstract work translated *things* about relationship, into dance and Antony Tudor's works:

.....used movement to explore psychological states (making) thoughts and feelings visible, thereby enriching the possibilities of narrative ballet (Anderson 1992:154).

I'm intrigued by these ideas making visible thoughts and feelings and enriching narrative possibilities? Dance can't really do this without words, when our normal communication is so dependent upon our being programmed for words. Although Balanchine made ballet works, I think many contemporary choreographers would echo his sentiments when he declared:

[D]ance has its own means of telling a story and need not invade the field of drama or the cinema. The quality of the movement and the choreographic idea decide whether the story is understandable. In most cases the criterion of success or failure lies in the choice of the subject matter (Anderson 1992:161).

So Balanchine recognized that dance is very limited in what it can say. And while there are works that are driven by a complex or difficult concept, dances that try to narrate with the movement alone are rare. Jack Anderson further says:

Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid*, to music by Aaron Copland, juxtaposes scenes from the life of the notorious outlaw with panoramic depictions of the settling of the west to imply that, despite their superficial glamour, lawless characters like Billy cannot be tolerated if civil order is to prevail (Anderson 1992:149).

So this dance apparently implies that civil order is dependent on good policing. How does the dance imply that, and which movement in particular was about civil order, and which depicted the panoramic settling of the west? Mostly the story was told with combining signs and context. Unlike Elyot's book that demonstrated semantic links between movements of the time and social order, it is history that tells us that *lawless characters cannot be tolerated*. We view the dance work, not the steps in relation to what we know of American history. In a different culture

Billy the Kid might be interpreted quite differently. There does exist inherently significant human movement, but body language and movement are simply (or not so simply but rather profoundly) signifiers, and they are most effective when combined with words as in natural language. What is important is that we need these signifiers in all interpersonal communication, and they relate to context and the multitude of mutual conventions. Shaking your head can accompany a 'yes' or a 'no' or 'I don't know' depending on context, culture and time in history.

As well, we explore our world in a way that sets up hierarchies of understanding. There seems to be this tendency to fix things in whatever context is most familiar to us. So, translation can mean change, not just transfer. A trio I performed once was watched and then translated (reformulated/reworded) by a ballet dancer into her version of a classical story. That is, the abstract plot-less contemporary dance (a competition of sorts between furniture and choreographic phrases accompanied by several pieces of music) was assumed to have a plot that followed the storyline of an existing narrative ballet. It was not so much that the contemporary work was designed to be similar to the ballet, but rather that ballet (and many art forms) uses universal themes in the relationship of characters that can be applied to many stories, and the contemporary work fitted that model. The ballet dancer understood that particular story, rather than inventing a new story for herself or simply appreciating the choreography and interplay between the dancers. A reason for this tendency may be that human cognition is conservative:

[P]eople strongly resist changing their central conceptions. Rather than give up a set of beliefs that are central to us, we will ignore, explain away, or even misperceive contrary evidence (Spelke 2005:29).

British singer and songwriter Billy Bragg says we see what we want to see and disregard the rest. We know things because they are related to other things. Rarely do we know things in isolation. There is usually a cluster; a causal or related paradigm.

7. Unreliable Nonverbals

Movement is parasitic in its relationship to words. We make most sense when we combine verbal and nonverbal. “Only when language is combined with something other than linguistic signs is it able to mean” (Ruthrof 2000:31). We deliver verbal and nonverbal together seamlessly, but non verbal signification in the form of body language takes years to imprint. We learn what a smile or a frown means a year or so after birth, though we can smile or frown even in the womb, layers of meaning are added as we grow and discover verbal language.

That is, the central nervous system is a massively parallel, adaptive system in which the biophysical makeup of the brain and its functioning are inextricably interwoven, continuously updating, modifying, replacing, and generating new neural connections (Koch & Laurent, 1999). Even human growth and development is not contingent on a central processor but emerges piecemeal from specific experiences the infant encounters through movement and activity "softly assembled" within the current task domain (Bertenthal cited in Seitz 2000:16).

What we physically experience feeds back to our mind through our body to help both mind and body synergistically develop. This is a unique part of being a human. Human development indicates “a close correspondence between action and perception” (Ibid). We are not conscious of how complex the task of communication is or of the importance of communication in development. In an intriguing study regarding dance teaching methods, Johnston says that “limiting the use of private speech in ballet training has a detrimental impact upon student cognition” (Johnston 2006:3). It seems dancers need speech to grow their thinking ability, pointing to the interactivity of physical and verbal development. We are formed by action and words and “[T]he linkage between language and our nonverbal construals is at the heart of meaning” (Ruthrof 2000:21).

The reason we cannot accurately *read* most nonverbal vocabulary *in* performance, is that we cannot accurately read most nonverbal vocabulary in everyday life. And there is a small but vitally important caveat to accompany the

previous sentence - unless it has a verbal framework. When we touch, or feel, using our sense of touch or proprioception, we bypass the verbal filters of our conscious thinking brain. We return to the days before words, either in terms of short-term individual human development or historically/evolutionally. Carpenter (as cited in Moore and Yamamoto 1988:43) has noted that: "When natives talk about their own world, they speak about how things smell, taste, feel, sound". He believes that

[I]lteracy ushered man into the world of divided senses. The value accorded the eye at the expense of all the other senses destroyed the harmonic orchestration of the senses...It created a hierarchy of senses, with sight the highest, touch the lowest (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:43).

Regarding communication then, what we see and hear would seem more reliable than what we feel. While a child cannot separate themselves from their feelings, what we rely on as adults is rational processing of our feelings. As a result of the uniquely human, creative aspects to our intelligence, we can stand back and observe our own behaviour.

Calvin demonstrates how animals are largely driven by unconscious patterning/innate programs, arguing that we shouldn't equate intelligence with purpose and complexity. "Both innate and learned behaviors can be long and complex" (Calvin 1997:15). As a result he says: "Whale song and insect nest building may be equally unintelligent" (Ibid). However, what humans demonstrate is a result of both construction through trial and error and an outcome of developed intelligence. In the human, these two things establish a feedback relationship to each other to develop language as we know it today. Without both of these things working together – our intelligence feeding our trials and learning from our errors as well, in a constant feedback loop – we might just be animals. A complex pattern can be developed by trial and error, but in humans we see a variety of patterns of individual expression within one species. All whale song is equal. But not everyone can sing like Placido Domingo.

Complex patterns also exist within nonverbal communication. This complexity means we cannot read someone's movement to know *why* they are in a particular emotional state, unless we know the context. If we know why a line of people are dressed in black their behaviour may make a lot of sense.

[M]uch of the body-mediated information conveyed in human communications have neither grammar nor clause structure. For actual communication to take place, it is necessary to clarify the mechanism of body-mediated information directly linked to human emotions. For that purpose, it is crucial to build up a relational model concerning body movements and emotional expressions, whose correlation is still ambiguous (Sakata et al 2004).

We generally need to ask, sensitively, about the reason for a state of subdued sobriety, unless there is enough contextual information, for example, that indicates that the people in black are at a funeral. And that is our experience of how gestures and situations are read-able in the real world, where a spade seems to be a shovel. Once we have removed the language from the normal or natural situation and placed it into the world of art. Normal rules of syntax and interpretation do not apply. A rose might by any other name smell as sweet, but when the rose is used symbolically by a filmmaker to suggest the British Empire (Monaco 2000:162), then we understand the scent of the rose is no longer the issue, except in terms of the symbology.

Conversely if we go backward from a word we find, not a gesture or a posture, but an idea/thought/concept struggling to find expression through the body. We are body and mind. Mime, it seems, can link the mind to the body and can be an effective nonverbal way to tell a story, as it represents reality very clearly with nonverbal symbols. These symbols are highly refined contextual movement signs of an iconic nature (highly motivated, and very constrained), which are easy to read for even an illiterate person. We use elements of mime at times in normal communication, for example by opening our hands and turning the palms outward to we show we have nothing to give, or nothing hidden, or no

idea. Pre-literate children have to be taught this gesture. But even mime is open to interpretation, and is kind of boring to watch for long, unless you watch a master at work, or there are accompanying sound effects. Many solo comedy performers use mime but add vocalizations to cement the narrative. The mime artist getting into the 'mime' car bangs his head on the car roof with accompanying 'thud' sound effect and we get the joke, having banged our head in the past as well. Watching a recent mime performance, even with the sound effects, however, my young son couldn't get the skilful physical gags about checking the engine oil, as he hasn't ever had to check the oil. The movement context was beyond his experience and therefore meaningless to him.

So that we are kept in the meaning loop narrative ballet tends to have the big virtuosic movements joined with moments of meaning. Most of a ballet at a physical level is just meaningless dancing that is joined with a special sort of mime, understood by a ballet audience to explicate the narrative wherein the Prince is 'told' he cannot marry the princess because she is bewitched. The dancing is not story at all, but if two people are on stage we understand from our life experience and from performance convention that two people mean relationship of some sort, so even in ballet it is obvious, therefore meaningful (Phillips personal correspondence 2005) that the man interacts with the woman for a reason, and one thing leads to another. We can't help but read things in relation to a *cluster* of things that we understand.

Dance depends on the inscrutable nature of nonverbal communication for movement to be read in one way at one time and another at a different time. If movement was easy to read and understand dance would actually be very confusing. Choreographic process makes for combinations of movement that are very far removed from normal everyday pedestrian arrangements. Many other demonstrations of interpretable nonverbals exist outside of dance. In his study of film, Monaco delves into the variety of ways that film gives meaning and there are similarities in the way we read the danced image on stage. Because of the

complexity and idiosyncratic relationships of sign and signifier, Monaco is *not* able to empirically state a semantic formula for the interpretation of film. “Poetry is what you can’t translate. Art is what you can’t define. Film is what you can’t explain” (Monaco 2000:65), though he does *attempt* to explain what he can.

Film-makers use the inscrutable nature of nonverbal communication whenever they want us to believe the plot of a thriller. Everyone is suspect and we don’t know who did it until the end, when all is revealed. We are lead to believe, via different interpretations of each individual’s actions, words and body language, that each could be guilty of the crime. Every scene encourages us to suspect the motivations and to link behaviour with what we would expect of the guilty party. We are shown what we think are clear indications of guilt or motive, but until the murderer is exposed and the machinations explained, few of us can spot the killer simply from appearances and what (little) we know about the character. That is, at least, in a good thriller where the combination of verbal and nonverbal are used effectively to suggest innocence or guilt. So how do we make sense in a thriller of a dance performance? As well as seeking a possible normal semantic relationship to meaning in the movement, we have to consider a whole host of other complications or implications from the choreographic process and the artist’s intention. What we see in performance, like in everyday/natural language, is coded movement, but unlike natural language, the conventions of an individual choreographer or style are often hidden from us and so the code is difficult to break.

Quoting Robert Frost, Monaco says that “poetry is what gets lost in translation” and so, “the genius of an art may be just those codes that don’t work well in any other art” (2000:65). For example:

In stage drama, gesture is central to the art, one of its basic codes. The offering of a ringed hand for the kiss of devotion is a specific sub code. But the way Laurence Olivier performs this gesture in Richard III is very peculiar to his own: a trope (Monaco 2000:65).

So while we can describe the system of an art in semiotic terms as “a collection of codes,” according to Monaco, “the unique activity of an art however lies in its tropes” (Monaco 2000:65). Likewise, although rhythm is an essential code of music and can be studied and recreated at will, there exists many elaborate sub codes and so for example:

the exciting, idiosyncratic syncopations of Thelonius Monk’s music are tropes. There is no way to quantify them scientifically and that precisely is the genius of Thelonius Monk (Monaco 2000:65).

In dance, I interpret tropes as these genius codes that are beyond even what a choreographer might attempt to apply to his dancers. The idiosyncratic motivation a choreographer is not just crafting but also in making the movement. Dancers often resemble their choreographer when they move, in their movement quality, but a trope is above and beyond a stylistic tendency and refers to “the often very unusual and illogical way those codes and signs are used to produce new, unexpected meanings” (Monaco 2000:64). A trope might describe choices an individual might make on top of their idiosyncrasies while improvising for example. An improviser draws on the vocabulary available to them, and presents an improvisation in their style through their body, but also makes choices unique to their imagination and will, much like how we speak. We improvise our utterances using a vast store of vocabulary and filter the words into being through our body and our personality. A trope is therefore impossible to teach or reproduce at will by anyone *except the tropist!* This makes an individual choreographer’s body language and choreographic choices so much more inscrutable, and dependent on translation or interpretation. If we consider dance, like film, as a system of symbols, then the interpretation also becomes an interactive process.

Sperber’s notion is that symbol systems are knowledge; interpretation depends on unconscious shared knowledge (1975:35). The anthropologist, he argues, must study symbolic systems consciously by the same procedures used by the native in acquiring them unconsciously:

each new item of information is incorporated into information already in the mind and preexisting structures are developed more fully to accommodate new information (Hanna 1979:238).

In relation to my argument, the *native* is a dancer and the *anthropologist* is the viewer. Contemporary work is full of *unconsciously acquired shared knowledge*, which may be quite hidden to the viewer. To interpret dance interactively, and therefore fully, the audience would need to study the choreography (symbolic systems) in the same way a dancer unconsciously *acquires* and *incorporates* movement vocabulary (new items of information) into their repertoire through repetition and rehearsal. This seems a lengthy and difficult process for an audience to go through. What happens instead, for an audience, is that they ignore the usual requirements of verbal and nonverbal communication and suspend disbelief to make sense according to what the particular convention is. In the suspension of disbelief, we choose to accept that the ballet steps tell a story and, in opera, that the massive 40 year old soprano is a 16 year old Egyptian slave. If we actually looked at dance with a semantic microscope we would see lots of squiggling organisms, but not much meaning.

With dance, an already abstract and some say unintelligible, untranslatable form, it seems incredible that a choreographer could combine inscrutable bodies with abstract movement and yet remain within the limit of comprehension. Like when we speak and utter novel things from our vast store of clustered words, a choreographer improvises combinations of movement from their choreographic vocabulary and experience each time a new work is made. If we consider that dance is somehow linked to the fact that we sense the world physically but understand the world verbally, then it might make sense that we watch dance for a different reason than we watch verbal forms of theatre. Perhaps dance is in the same 'too hard' basket as other non representational art forms, and it is not possible to state semantically how it is that dance affects us. Though, we might know that we are affected.

8. Intuition

Viewing dance performance *and discovering meaning therein*, requires not just being open to the experience as in the idea of a passive receiver, but also participating, in semiotic terms, in the reading of the work. Like language it is the combination of verbal and nonverbal, the *cluster* of kinaesthetic and intellectual concerns that brings meaning in dance. We watch performances for several reasons and this means that we also have several ways of interpreting what we see. This specialized way of looking involves an appreciation of phenomena that occur at more than a conscious intellectual level. At the same time, some performance makes a great deal of sense or seems to speak directly to me. Some dance leaves me none the wiser, but with a feeling of appreciation. I recently saw the Rosas Dance Company from Belgium perform *Rain*. It is a sublime piece of choreography, densely crafted and meticulously performed for 70 minutes without interval and without narrative. I was moved almost to tears by the combination of music, athleticism, skill and the crafting of movement and setting. Explaining why I appreciated it becomes tricky because like so many things that we say we understand about the world around us (Keil 2006:18), appreciation of the arts is dependent upon so many factors that we take for granted, meaning that possible readings are multitudinous.

When we eat a meal we experience sensations and tastes while we converse with one another and the dinner becomes a complete sensorial experience. Though the feeding of the mind occurs through conversation, not through the food. “[I]t is difficult to make a “statement” in, say, the language of green vegetables” (Monaco 2000:35). The way that we eat a meal is sometimes very pragmatic, and we may not be conscious of the tastes, flavours and aromas involved, as we are preoccupied with getting the calories into our mouth. We might be worried about an important matter and not notice how flavour-some a dish might be. At other times, the meal might be more of a social or festive occasion, during which human interaction takes precedence. Sometimes we

might be unable to use words to describe what we taste, and groans or sighs might suffice. While at an expensive restaurant with gourmands, the discussion of the sensations – taste, colour, aroma and presentation involved in eating, are of paramount importance. And for the host who created the meal, like a choreographer making a dance, the skill of preparation is realized, she hopes, when the meal is consumed. The meal is eaten, and like the dance work received/read, even if some guests/audience are oblivious to the skilful and purposeful combination of tastes and textures. Dance is best, like food, as an aesthetic experience, however skilfully it is crafted. If it is not to our taste, the crafting will be beside the point. Not all meals have precisely the same effect, even if the calorific value is the same. Sometimes our appetite is sated, while at other times the enjoyment of the meal has more to do with the company or the surroundings. And yet every meal keeps us alive, or energized, whether it is a social affair or not.

A lack of daily artwork on the other hand does not mean the end of us. We can usually choose whether we consume art or not, and there are those who can take it or leave it, and be no worse off for the lack of the experience, though the neurological and social development of a human being from infancy is dependent on more than facts and figures. We are acculturated by our social interactions, and sensation is crucial to some neurological explanations of learning.

When we attempt “a prolonged investigation of the surface” (Gilmour 1986:56) of an artwork, like when we consciously appreciate something edible (or strive to dissect the flavours in a glass of wine), we choose to put ourselves into a special mode of critical functioning. If we walk into an art gallery with a focus on a business meeting then there is a good chance we will miss the Da Vinci just inside the door, or if we notice it we will not necessarily recognize whether it is an original masterpiece or just a cheap print. Having been primed that what we are seeing is priceless and special, however, we might make a more ‘prolonged investigation’, and come to the conclusion that we are

witnessing an important image or event, by linking the information before us with a cluster of other pieces of information. With encouragement and experience, we may begin to understand the importance of a work of art without such a long investigation. Our opinion might also come into play more quickly with our reasoning so that we respond critically as well as emotionally. We learn to move faster from the experience to higher levels of critical discourse. We need experience of the particular kind of artwork in question to avoid subjectivism and give the work an in-depth reading. In other words, the conscious processing brain tends to be short circuited or made redundant *until* we ruminate on, and have to compare or articulate, what we have sensed.

What follows is the 'easy out' for some choreographers I think. As an example from a newspaper article, an Artistic Director makes what I think is a common misconception, regarding a dance version of *La Boheme* without the libretto. He thinks: "because dance is universal and does not rely on language, it has the ability to communicate in a different way than scripted arts" (The Weekend Australian Review 2004:16). He says that his approach, rather than using words or songs, is to explain a character's relationships to other performers with "body movement and choreographic symbols" (Ibid:17), whereas what actually does the bulk of the work is words in the story that we already know.

We understand from Shakespeare's words in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, and the scene he sets, just how Romeo feels about Juliet. The textual story explains a character's relationship. The movement, or physical relationships between characters, simply confirm what we already know or can guess given that we are watching a version of *Romeo and Juliet*. According to Calvin, we use categorical perception to help us understand (Calvin 1997:38): "We are always guessing, filling in the details when something is heard faintly" (1997:39). And according to William James, it happens all the time without us knowing:

When we listen to a person speaking or (we) read a page of print, much of what we think we see or hear is supplied from our memory. We overlook misprints, imagining the right letters, though we see the wrong ones; and how little we actually hear, when we listen to a speech, we realize when we go to a foreign theatre; for there what troubles us is not so much that we cannot understand what the actors say as that we cannot hear their words. The fact is that we hear quite as little under similar conditions at home, only our mind, being fuller of English verbal associations, supplies the requisite material for comprehension upon a much slighter auditory hint.

This fill-in from memory is part of what's known as categorical perception:unless a sound repeats, we may not be able to compare our filled-in perception of it to the original; fortunately, where visual phenomena are concerned, we can often manage a second look and catch the mistake before getting committed to "the apparition". We now know that suggestibility....can augment our natural tendencies to jump to conclusions, allowing memories to be interpreted as current reality (James as cited in Calvin 1997:40).

If we relate these ideas to the interpretation of dance, we receive suggestions in many forms, musically, textually, contextually, (and that includes so many staging and theatrical devices, from lights to costume). We are subject to these suggestions in the same way we unconsciously respond to social mores. We often need to remind children why it is that we do what we do socially and eventually it becomes unconscious behaviour. But even if we understand why we do something, it is difficult to counteract what we have as a program or invent an alternate program without some effort. Also it is hard for us to believe what we know to be true or that our understanding is dependent on things other than what might first appear to us. The movement is not the bit we understand, it is everything else. The other bits tell the story, while we let the movement wash over us. We enjoy the movement and appreciate it viscerally but we cannot read it. Perhaps it is more that we use categorical perception and, to paraphrase Calvin, when we watch dance our mind, being fuller of non verbal associations, supplies the requisite material for comprehension upon a slight physical hint. We enjoy watching the dancing but we don't *read* the dancing. The words tell the story and the choreography cooperates musically and aesthetically wherever it can.

Dance is universal in the same way language is universal. At the same time, knowing Japanese doesn't make me able to speak, read, or understand Swahili. There are many types of dance and many readings possible of any particular dance. To say that dance can be read in a particular way ignores that dance, like any nonverbal form (whether trying to tell a story or not), must be viewed in a particular way, and still can provide a myriad of possible readings. A choreographer might deny using words or songs to tell a story, and then calls a work by a name – *La Boheme* using the well-known opera (with attendant libretto and storyline) to frame and reference the dance. According to Shakespeare a rose can be called any other name and still smell as good. Our aesthetic sense of dance is different to our sense of smell. You can't fool your sense of smell. If a dance is made using "body movement and choreographic symbols" *alone*, and was not given a title I doubt we would understand the work was a version of *La Boheme* at all. Between the incomprehensible/abstract/neutral movement vocabulary of ballet and the narrative is a massive gulf that the audience agrees to bridge with their *reading* and cooperation.

Says a conductor of an orchestra, about the same version of *La Boheme*: "What you can sing and what you can express with your body are totally different" (The Weekend Australian Review 2004:16). A good singer embodies the song the way we embody daily speech and so the body language makes sense with the narrative of the song. If we didn't know we were watching a version of *La Boheme*, and there was no music, and no libretto, much would be lost in the translation. The idea that you don't "have to view dance with any sort of predetermined knowledge of the art form. You simply have to be open to the experience of being affected" (Ibid:17), may be precisely true if we take dance on its kinaesthetic merits. I can get chills or sigh when watching movement because it touches me in a way that is beyond words. Music is similar in this regard. But dance that tries to tell a story is hamstrung by its affective potency. Body language is an evolutionary hangover from the days when we didn't have

language. We are becoming more economical with the spoken word and perhaps more critical of the 'moving word', that is, *dance*. But being open to the experience means not reading. If we read a dance work prescriptively, we are actually kidding ourselves or using our imagination very creatively.

To say you don't need a pre-determined knowledge of an art form ignores art's link to language, and presupposes that we can all read and write linguistic words and further, forgets we have read or heard stories since we were children. Without a predetermined knowledge base from which we can then extrapolate (like natural language), the majority of dance work would be inexplicable and confusing. We take so much for granted when we see a dance and interpret what we see. According to Balanchine: "A ballet may contain a story, but the visual spectacle, not the story is the essential element" (as cited in Foster 1986:17). Some may choose to explore as well as the visual spectacle, how the spectacle moved them and enter into critical discussion of the processes involved.

When an experienced watcher sees dance, they know certain things that the casual observer may not, like how the work was crafted, what style the choreographer generally employs, whether the choreographer has a history and how this work is informed by previous ones. Just by looking we cannot know for certain what went through the choreographer's mind in the making of this work and what she was trying to achieve. So in that regard everyone is at a loss when first viewing a new dance work. Without reading program notes or hearing from the creator, we have to try to read and guess or intuit, what the work is about. Without words we are lost, or maybe just a little linguistically misdirected, and geographically embarrassed.

9. My Work

I don't believe in a corporeal poetic that brings meaning outside of the assistance of words. I do believe in beauty and truth, but that they rarely come together without a good deal of crafting. Work that speaks to me or moves me emotionally somehow links beauty and truth, and usually has a semantic link to meaning. This chapter describes some of my work and process, and looks a little at how I try to combine meaning and movement. But in exploring what I try to do I want also to point the finger at all sorts of dance. The work I have made in recent years explores in different ways the issues I have been exploring in this thesis. But I believe this principle is common to all dance regardless of style or process. All dance has and needs a semantic link to meaning through words if it is to communicate.

I really enjoy the way some dance work combines spoken word with movement. One company that intrigues me is the DV8 Physical Theatre Company from Britain. Their artistic policy says that DV8 wants to remove "the barriers between dance, theatre and personal politics and, above all, communicating ideas and feelings clearly and unpretentiously" (DV8 Website *About DV8* 2006). This idea appeals to me, and makes me consider that the way I choreograph and would like to work. Good dance theatre today is not so dependent on a formalized technique, but is driven by a desire to explore, paradoxically in the most absurd of manifestations, a nonverbal movement form. But according to Ruthrof, "Language is empty, it remains without meaning, if it is not associated with its Other, the nonverbal" (Ruthrof 2000:30). Perhaps that is why we need words with dance and why dance has lost meaning for my culture. What we have come to believe is meaningful, simply isn't.

Lloyd Newson's approach resonates with me and what I have attempted to do in relation to exploring meaning and movement. I often wonder what is

possible in terms of combining conscious reasoning and intuition with the use of text in a dance work? Given that movement and text, verbal and nonverbal information, are received simultaneously and exist symbiotically in our everyday, it is hard to separate the two strands of communication, even though in many aspects of life and learning those two threads are readily separated as *if* they were quite distinct and autonomous. In this chapter I will compare some of my work with one recent work of DV8's.

The Cost of Living, a dance film, does a thing that I really love. The dancers are seen as people, real people, flesh and blood with personalities and lives that might exist outside of the performance. Besides actually using their own names, the performers are given permission to speak about how they or their characters are feeling, even while they are dancing. Also, the dancers, while they appear as ordinary (or extraordinary in the case of Dave the legless man) people, in ordinary places (at the beach, at home, on the street) still perform 'extraordinary aesthetic movement'. And maybe that is simply a human trait. Necessity is the mother of invention. We can do the most extraordinary things if we have to even if, like Dave, we're not trained dancers. I love to see people do extraordinary things with their bodies. Additionally, the spoken words cooperating with the context of each scene in *The Cost* tell the story, and as well the dancing is interesting to look at. The choreography doesn't pretend to say too much. When the masked clown faces move in time with each other we recognise the arcade game in the skilful performance, and when one recalcitrant clown loses his face and protests that the work is demeaning it makes me laugh. The meaning is provided mostly by context of the performers in relation to each other. I love this juxtaposition of virtuosity and social comment.

Another thing I like about *The Cost of Living* is that you would not necessarily recognize that the performers are dancers until they dance, and then because of the strength of their vocal performances, it is hard to know if they are

actors dancing or the reverse. The performers move seamlessly into and out of stylised movement and different states of being without having to take a deep breath and prepare or announce they are going to do something extraordinary, like a gymnast pausing to compose himself before a big tumbling run. The difference between being dancers and being simply pedestrian, is beautifully balanced perhaps because they are clearly very skilled performers. I strive to find that balance in my own work by allowing the dancers a more pedestrian aesthetic.

Often in performance, the dancer is objectified, being the person the choreography made silent and/or unimportant or only significant in being able to perform the steps. It could be any dancer who does the steps, or so an artistic director once told me. In *The Cost of Living*, the performers are always dancers and yet always people, or when they appear to be just dancers dancing, then the scene is subverted, (not necessarily with words as some characters are silent throughout) reminding us that they are people. Often dancers are portrayed as superhuman, or at least appear to be capable of superhuman feats (or super-pedestrian feats perhaps) and normal characteristics of being human are hidden or assumed to no longer exist. In *The Cost*, the girls dancing on the grass start to talk with the boys upstairs, and we have to shift how we look at the performers. The definitions of dancer and actor and person are made interchangeable. Then, this message is compounded when one of the performers is without legs, a state that would generally preclude dancing, and yet dance he does, and also makes us question what makes you a man, if one lacks the defining characteristics of the normal bipedal human. Questions are asked in one scene by the camera man and things are said that we ordinarily wouldn't when faced with difference and in particular disability, and yet which must be a part of a disabled person's daily conversations. *The Cost of Living* seems to suggest that dancing is an everyday activity, that all people can do, or perhaps that dancers aren't so special.

Difference is highlighted in *The Cost of Living*, and yet it conversely makes us aware of sameness. Human needs for intimacy, play, and respect are shared by the characters even though they do not necessarily use words to speak of need. As one character calls out to his offended girlfriend: “You don’t even know what I was thinking!” His nonverbal communications were either incorrectly translated, or unclearly delivered. Or maybe she read his thoughts very clearly because knowing him very well she knew his “corporeal poetic”. Grammatical structure is a blueprint that applies to language across cultures, but as a result of idiosyncratic expression even a culturally shared need to communicate doesn’t mean a universally successful interpretation. Even though we share common genetic makeup with those of our species, the uniqueness of each individual is not decreased by sharing a language. Similarly, we make the most sense in a combination of verbal and nonverbal, regardless of physical appearance.

In my choreographic practice, I have also explored the concept of self and community. Investigating this and world events since the World Trade centre disaster lead me to explore greed in a solo performance. To avoid the “self righteousness that mars so much issue-based work” (Miller 2003) I tried to satirise our society post ‘9/11’, as America and the media in general like to brand the destruction of the Twin Towers. *Shopping fashion travel and genocide* is a solo show ostensibly about current affairs or what were current in 2003, in the wake of the Iraq war and debates in Australia surrounding refugees. Here the movement tried at times to illustrate a story, but in order to communicate specific ideas and concepts, I needed to return to words. The movement was crafted and skilful and simply good to watch while the words framed the movement for the viewer. Many choreographers are interested in the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations available to the viewer. I hoped to define the choreography more explicitly with the use of text.

Shopping fashion travel and genocide was performed in a simple black box space, with two video screens and a wall covered in newspaper. While it was

a dance performance by a dancer (me), there was a lot of text delivered live and at times via a live feed from a handcam that was projected onto a screen. At times I was a dancer representing an idea or concept, performing abstract, *fashioned* or *embellished* movement, for example the staggering movements imitative of a starving man and at other times using spoken words about being a starving man. At times I was a more theatrical and literal caricature of a TV chef or an irate city dweller depending on how these characters would explicate the movement. I literally fell from scene to scene with a choreographic device, in which a collapse backward, as in falling out of an arch, would allow me to jump cut to another idea or character. Each scene allowed other representations of this back ward arch, for example, trees swaying from an atomic blast or bending over backwards for someone, but the arch was an extrapolation of a gesture inspired by a physical response to being overwhelmed. The arch *stood for*, or tried to represent a variety of things, but did not have a definitive meaning. Perhaps that is another reason that work like DV8's, which attempts clear communication of meaning but acknowledges multiple readings, resonates with me.

In *Shopping fashion travel and genocide*, I wanted to express the anger I felt when confronted with news about world poverty and war. It seems that things happening to people in Africa (or even closer to home, to the disadvantaged in our relatively wealthy societies) are somehow OK when they happen to others, because *they* are not like us. I also wanted to explore the uneasiness I felt about the possibility that I was complicit in what Martin Luther King called the twin evils of racism and poverty (King 1963). Our lives are so disconnected from the horrors of life for what is called the *majority world* (Pilger 1998), and our consumerist society discourages too much focus on how it is that we have so much to consume. So I am suspicious that there is some truth being hidden from us and that the bigger picture might horrify us.

I tried to present these ideas from both sides of an imaginary political fence. By setting up a verbal argument with myself and physically jumping from one opposing point of view to another, back and forth several times throughout the work, I also hoped to visit the idea of *dialogue* in a different way. Words like *insane* and *unreasonable* are used to describe both suicide bombers and the President of the United States, by both suicide bombers *and* the president about each other. So I tried to express this using words and action and humour as both protagonists try to get the higher moral ground by stacking chairs on top of each other until the argument became too heated to continue in a civilized way and, at that point, the two towers of chairs, like the twin towers in New York, came tumbling down. The combination of the text of political argument, and the video projection of skyscrapers meant that the stacks of chairs were then read as representations of the twin towers. My movement, while choreographed and perhaps poetic was incidental to the meaning, and yet it brought about meaning through the connection to words like conflict, struggle, argument and also the spoken text.

To express our contemporary obsession with consuming I wastefully littered the stage in the final scene with champagne, chips, noodles and whipped cream. This choreographed and messy finale was my attempt to subvert any notions that I was taking the subject too seriously. By juxtaposing my appallingly careless behaviour with the carefree Bobby Darin song, *Rain on my Parade*, I let the combination of music and choreography and scene 'tell the story' in the context of the rest of the performance. But I didn't speak a word.

Another dance, which I choreographed using words to explore meaning, was a combative contact improvisational duet. *Commentary* was a movement study designed to encourage dialogue about dance, a marginal art form in Australia. The duet was performed to a live commentary between two actors sitting in the audience. I wanted to compare the way that we are able to talk about sport and politics, that is, effortlessly, critically and in an informed way, with

the way we might talk about dance, if dance was an integral and respected part of our culture. In 'Commentary' I subvert what could be a deep and meaningful contact improvisation duo, by adding text that explains (for the initiated and un-initiated) what the performers are doing. I like work that demystifies the choreography, like seeing how a magician does the trick.

There was a show on ABC Radio hosted by two comedians, in which their characters---Roy and HG---brought to their entertaining commentary of sporting events all sorts of in-depth and critical discussion in a most satirical way. I was inspired by their show to similarly satirize both arts and sports commentary at the same time. It is interesting to note that most physical entertainment or sporting activities that we watch today (especially on television), have a huge spoken commentary component. And it is not just about advertising, although that happens as well. The rules of sports (and indeed social relationship) are also explained to us from an early age through sporting clubs, school, competitions, training, play in the back yard; all of these situations reinforce the understanding of a sport (or language and everyday pedestrian interaction) and its rules and methodology. In other words, the physical is entwined in some way with the verbal. At a 'live performance' of a sport you will be surrounded by supporters or detractors of the state of the 'game', and there is enough information contextually, in many forms (umpiring decisions, commentary over the PA, written information in the program, comments from other spectators) to explain what is happening. An audience at a live performance of theatre is discouraged from this sort of interactivity, so that the convention of separation of audience and performer is not destroyed. It is difficult to maintain a traditional performance space if the audience is too excitable. The closest equivalent may be the 'Pot Black' commentator who whispered his commentary so as not to disturb the focus of the billiard players, although that may have been pure theatre as the commentator may have been watching from a sound-proof booth.

Audio commentary in sports shows seem to focus often on the most minute details regarding the athletes---their preparation, likes and dislikes, difficulties, injuries and minutiae. Critical dialogue in the arts can also become quite focused on an individual artist's practice, methodologies, favourite media or approach or conceptual matters and can be dense and difficult to interpret. But arts commentary does not usually happen during performance, while commentary occurs usually contiguously with sports performance. Sports commentators often discuss individual athletes, so I tried to focus on the people who were the performers by referring to the performers by name. A dancer may be written about in a review in terms of their interpretation, but never *while* they are performing, as happens with an ice skater or a track and field athlete.

In *Commentary* the actors improvised around a script such that each section of the dance roughly corresponded to a section of text, but the movement wasn't linked to the words in a *semantic* way. Rather, the text was timed to coincide with different sections. The choreography was meant to imply contest, and the commentary focused attention on different aspects of the performance. The movement spoke for itself as we easily recognise two men fighting each other, albeit in a choreographed and stylistic way. In a way, sports commentary is quite improvised in relation to the state of play, not unlike some structured improvisation in performance. And interestingly, some research shows that there is a link between discussion of physical tasks and cognitive development in regard to ballet dancers (Johnston 2006). So developing rigorous dialogue skills may assist in the development of vigorous dancers. But at the time I was primarily concerned with a parody of the audience-artist dialogue and not of cognitive development. By setting up a live commentary, I hoped to direct the audience to consider what they were thinking of the performance, if they knew any better than the commentators and could they enter into the debate in an informed way? Also working with the idea of the body and the mind being separate entities, a video of the actor's mouths was projected onto the

cyclorama, while what happened on stage was physical performance by mute dancers.

The actors had no body and the dancers had no voice, and yet there were lots of words surrounding the performance. But again the steps themselves had little or no relation to the narrative. The combination of the steps demonstrated a contest between two men and the commentary asked the audience to consider what was telling the story. I wanted to push the drama of the contest by the commentator's arguments, in a situation where the drama is usually entrusted to the crafting of the choreography and the staging. I wanted the commentary to suggest that the choreography was a novel event, (i.e. that it was performed for the first time) when that is what we are supposed to think when we watch a theatre production. We like to watch something unfold over time and, if it is a narrative that we are familiar with, pretend we don't know or forget what is going to happen. There was not much chance of the outcome being terribly different each night, unlike a sporting competition in which there are many variables which can affect the outcome such that one team triumphs over another.

I also introduced language that was quite 'contemporary dance specific', to highlight how specialized the art form was, or perhaps how exclusive many forms are as a result of specialization. It is my feeling that dance in Australia is marginalized in two ways:

- externally – by structures and policies and cultural practices that make dance a fringe practice, and dancers fringe dwellers, and

- internally by developing a sub culture which is foreign and/or opaque to casual observers and hence it is difficult, without assistance in the form of education or translation, to become more than a casual observer.

If you go to see a football match it is much easier to become acculturated. Or is it just as easy to become acculturated at a ballet performance? I guess if you dress appropriately and use the correct language at either event and obey the conventions and demonstrate familiarity with the performers and the event, then

it could be said that both sports and the arts share a similar ability to acculturate. That is if one is attending live performances frequently.

However, most unfamiliar sporting endeavours (is there such a thing for an adult male in Australia?), like unfamiliar theatre would be impenetrably complex without some commentary. We would get the general idea, but without knowledge of the rules, an understanding of the game, explanation of the state of play and clarification of the historical position/relationship of the combatants, I doubt it would be well understood. While a simple athletic contest is enjoyable and even enthralling to watch for its sheer drama (and I find the use of the word drama wonderfully ironic), there is no agenda for athletics in terms of communication. There is beauty and skill and timing and drama in most sport, but the primary importance in a sporting contest is not communication. "That sports are "unintentional" (that is, that they are not performed to make a point) simply increases the potential variety of our experience of them" (Monaco 2000:35). But while sports do not set out to tell a story, the point of the commentary is explication, in other words, story.

Sport is best watched when you take sides. Similarly, watching dance you have to 'barrack' (suspend disbelief, imagine, make up a narrative) in one way or another or it will be uninteresting and perhaps meaningless. Dance often tries to communicate and is usually made in such a way that a reading is possible, implied or designed. It might be possible to read a sporting contest, but what usually happens instead is that we align ourselves with (barrack for) one of the two sides competing, and then it makes sense. I don't barrack seriously for any sports team, and I have few friends, outside of practicing artists, with whom I can talk critically about the arts. So in *Commentary*, I hoped that the audience would be encouraged to barrack for either or both of the protagonists on stage by aligning themselves with either of the commentators or to consider the irony of barracking for a contest whose outcome was already decided by the choreography. By loving the story *Swan Lake*, and the ballet vocabulary, and the

music of Tchaikovsky for example, we decide to barrack for the movement that we believe tells the story, when the movement is not really doing the work. The movement is certainly skilful and dynamic, but rarely has a semantic relationship to meaning.

I love to watch both ball sports and dance. So I personally feel caught between arts and sports subcultures. *Commentary* was perhaps an attempt to bridge the two subcultures and imagine myself representing Australia as an aesthetic athlete. I hoped that both *Shopping fashion travel and genocide* and *Commentary* made the audience more informed about the meaning behind, or on top of the movement. As well, I hoped that the movement could be watched by itself and be interesting because in this and other ways dance shares more with elements of spectator sport than discursive intellectual activity.

I argue that movement alone **can** have a message for us - a smile, a shrug, a collapse into grief, a jump for joy, but the context of the movement is crucial to allow meaning to be inferred. We understand the winner's exuberant leaps and the dejected posture of the losers, but only in context. If they were transposed as in an abstract movement study or applied choreographically to a narrative, then we must accept another premise for the meaning of the movement. It's not possible to read dance like a linguistic language even *if* we know the particular movement vocabulary intimately. Dance, and in particular contemporary dance is rendered impenetrable for most viewers without some textual accompaniment, or the active participation of the imagination.

Conclusion

Dance is only a part

Maybe dance is the best language and the one we should use and that is why all cultures have dance, but in gaining words we have forgotten and can never remember how to interpret this kind of literacy. Instead we practice everyday use of verbal and nonverbal, and understand these two elements as a seamless whole. We do not usually separate words from their embodiment in interpersonal communications. We see and hear the messages other people give to us through their bodies, vocally and physically. We are mind and body, brain and flesh. When they are separated, we struggle to communicate as effortlessly. Phone calls, text messages, letters, cannot carry as much information as a flesh and blood communicator. We learn this thing called communication as an infant and apply the learning to successive stages of development in a uniquely human way. We have the ability to: “extend our systems of knowledge into territory that lies beyond their initial bounds” (Spelke 2005:31). But it is difficult to empirically study how we develop these uniquely human traits/skills. We cannot ethically dissect the living human or use a control group of humans deprived of language in the long term to see how we acquire language, and how language acquires us.

There are many things taking place around us that we take for granted each day. The sun rises and sets, and we accept that sort of cyclical occurrence without question. However, in an eclipse, or if a plane flies across the face of the sun and a shadow falls across us we have to process the change in temperature as an anomaly. We don't have to think to sense something but, ironically, to make sense, we must put one and one together. Psychologists conclude that discursive thinking happens as a result of the process of learning – we take it for granted that a lot of processing happens from seeing to reading and understanding. We say we know things when perhaps we should say we imagine the reason. Humans don't like to feel ignorant and so will invent causative relationships between phenomena. We want to be masters of our universe, and

this drive is what makes us the pre-eminent animal, or being the pre-eminent animal gives us this drive, such that we are driven to interact. Even today's enlightened humans have this tendency, certainly in the developing infant. Developmental psychology says that infants make a link at particular stages of development between physical action and phenomena. That is they *interactively* invent their world (because they cannot separate themselves from the world) and simultaneously test out theories to develop their mental capacities. In a way we continue this learning process as adults when confronted with something we don't understand. We will usually invent an understanding that enables us to function without being overwhelmed by details.

In a paper called *Ignorance is Bliss*, Keil calls this phenomenon the "illusion of explanatory depth" (Keil 2006:18). If I can see the workings of a watch I can understand how the turning of one cog leads to the expression of time through the minute hand. "[T]his hierarchical structure of complex causal systems seduces us into a sense of understanding at a high level, which is then mistaken for having an understanding at a lower level" (Keil 2006:18). That is, for example, reading the time doesn't enable me to know how to make a timepiece. When we watch dance, we often understand what occurs on stage in relation to many other things occurring simultaneously. But we usually give credit to the movement, when we really need to see the movement as part of a complete communicative whole. If dance is watched with the belief that it means something, and/or the desire to make sense, then in a very Cartesian way, (oddly and simplistically) we think therefore it does. "The more parts you can see the more you think you know how those parts actually work" (Keil 2006:18).

Seeing can automatically lead to believing, once we have developed certain conventions.

[T]he understanding of art works such as dances makes a similar demand on the tradition within which those works are conceived. One understands the work in question in terms of that tradition, and that means in terms of

what one already knows. But this does not require knowing everything; knowledge (and learning) are not all or nothing. One can learn to understand, yet one's understanding still depends on what is learned (McFee 1992:53).

Watching football on television, the experience is similar: I learn more each season, but it seems there is always more to learn, or the experts introduce new and startling facts to the paradigm. We seem to overlook the massively complex and inter-related series of events that take place between movement and meaning. An artist (Bono from U2 for example) can call a woman a fish and a man a bicycle and we adapt to that understanding, without spending time teasing out how it is that this can make sense. If we study that event and attempt to travel the pathway from phenomenon to understanding, and then compare what others say about the same event, we appreciate the metaphor in relation to a vast number of possible other associations. Again Keil observes that the 'illusion' stops us from being overwhelmed by complexity but enables us to "know how to get more information from others when we really need it" (Keil 2006:18). I'm aligned with the idea that there is an element in common with religious practice when reading watching/looking at art:

[A]rtistic perception is intuitive, a matter of direct insight and not a product of discursive thinking ... It does not involve belief, nor lead to the acceptance of any proposition at all. *But neither is it irrational, a special talent for making a mystical, un-negotiated contact with reality* (author's emphasis) (Langer 1957:10).

Religion similarly can place an experiential realm too firmly in the world of rules, as we try to make sense or interpret an *experience* with *words*. Dance likewise is neither irrational, nor rational, but perhaps simply a human capacity which argues against or unites a dualistic understanding of consciousness. We attempt to do justice to an experience, be it religious or theatrical, by transcribing the experience into words. However we struggle to do the experience justice, even when we are inspired and skilfully craft a response. How is it that we are inspired? Is there such a thing as direct insight, something mystics and artists

call inspiration? Or do we become so practiced and skilful we forget the complex pathways we negotiate when we understand?

Actually, science says that **smell** is the oldest interpretive contact with our world and therefore perhaps: “We think because we smelled.” (Ruthrof 2000:102). But between smelling dinner cooking, and knowing that dinner is ready, or the house is on fire, there is a complex interactive learning process in which direct insight in the end, depends on our experience. We learn to discriminate between different sorts of touch, from different people in different circumstances, so that we know what is appropriate in physical relationships with others. Likewise, experience, (a verb) of *the* experience, (a noun), in artistic terms is necessary for an interpretation of many artistic expressions/phenomena, as it helps us to negotiate between left and right sides of the brain. I don't think it is possible to develop an aptitude for critical artistic perception until we have experienced a lot of direct insights. Thinking and feeling can be trained or honed as skills so that we can effortlessly intuit, but it takes time. Arnold Zable says on ABC radio in a debate with Raymond Gaita about thinking and feeling:

Plato in *The Republic*, as I understand it, puts the case for the philosopher's basic suspicion of poetry and literary practise (sic), which I think he argues 'corrupts by reason of appealing too much to the emotions. It trades in appearances rather than reality, in fictions rather than truth' (ABC Radio National? archives 2005).

If philosophy as a practice avoids the emotionalism of poetry, so as to remain clear, (and perhaps also remain on one side of the brain or in one way of processing), then art (like poetry) confuses the issue – not in mixing truth with fiction necessarily but by being a form that requires its own form of processing/understanding/perception. We want to make sense and yet at the same time want to explore and tease out the sense. It is as if, like in dance practice, we find balance by exploring being off balance. Knowing the one state informs the other. But not everyone explores the arts to find equilibrium. Perhaps we are all able, but we need to be educated or inoculated. It is as if there is only

one peptide able to digest the art protein, and if we lack that peptide we might need to inject ourselves daily or stimulate a gland to start producing special fluids to deal with art on demand. Perhaps that is what skilled artists can do at a moments notice, or a skilled audience can receive without thinking. But it does take skill.

Raymond Gaita replies to Zable:

I think it's a very deep and important fact about human life that we often learn most deeply when we're moved, and when we're moved we're moved because...if I might put it this way, the idiom in which whatever moves us has presented itself. Everybody knows this common experience where we say, 'I heard these words many, many times before but until so-and-so spoke them, I didn't see what they meant.' So it had to do with that particular person's presence; their intonation and all sorts of things...things we roughly call style. It's style that philosophers have always been suspicious of because they think that must appeal below the intellectual belt, that must appeal to the heart rather than the head, and in the end the heart could prompt hypotheses, prompt guesses, start debate, if you like, but these things have to be assessed by the head (ABC Radio National archives 2005).

So what we have seen and experienced beforehand educates us to find some balance between feeling and thinking.

Over the course of human development, each system of knowledge grows as the principles at its core are enriched by further, generally less reliable notions. In addition, distinct systems of knowledge come to guide an increasingly wide range of actions and come to be related to one another. Although studies of early development have not revealed the processes that enable children and adults to link distinct knowledge systems to one another and to systems guiding action, they suggest situations within which psychologists may begin to study these processes. Studies of these processes, in turn, may shed light on an aspect of cognition that is perhaps unique to humans: our ability to extend our systems of knowledge into territory that lies beyond their initial bounds (Spelke 2005:31).

We develop opinions and personal taste, but still have the same human hardware, and may continue to be divided creatures, of necessity, internally and

externally. Language is another experiment that humankind uses as a social glue but because the human body changes more slowly in cooperating than exploiting the gadgets we invent, we may always struggle physically to catch up to where our mind is at. I wonder if natural language will be usurped by technology, and delivered without using the body, mind to mind, (tele- or electro-pathically) or will we always need a scribal (or pixel) interface for our thoughts to resonate with one another? Today, through technology, the 'other' is more and more often a remotely located person.

Do our electronic lives separate us even more into mind and body, or like natural language, is communication with words the best we can do with the physically limited (or gifted?) and complex organism we are? We are too hard on Descartes or maybe Descartes was misquoted? Or perhaps he was taken out of context - 'I think therefore I am' isn't a blueprint for intellectuals criminalizing folk dances. Many authors speak of mind-body duality as a negative thing, as if we can be anything else! We live in our body, and our mind. You can't argue against biology. It's a moot point I think. We *are* two different things, *and* the interdependence of the body and the mind cannot be denied.

We are caught up in the persistent Cartesian dualism that we are comprised of two fundamentally different things - an extended substance (body) and an unextended substance (mind). But what if the mind and the body are really two different aspects of the same thing? What if the brain systems for movement and the brain systems for thought and emotion are intimately connected to each other so that we are literally a "thinking (and feeling) body?" (Seitz 1998:2).

Yes. What if? *Thinking* doesn't have to mean I am disconnected from my body, and likewise being good at moving doesn't need to make me stupid. "[T]he extended world of mankind is partly concrete and partly abstract, partly personal and partly universal" (Moore and Yamamoto 1988:73). But, and an important but, extensions are an abstraction of the concrete bio-physical world, and are

“reductionist in their capabilities”, so we “can never fully replace what was left out of extensions in the first place” (ibid).

This is not to dismiss dance just because it doesn't mean very much.

Having heard Mozart's Piano Concerto no.23 once, having drunk a single bottle of Chassagne-Montrachet, we do not think we have exhausted their possibilities. We also do not think to censure either the concerto or the wine because we cannot discover “meaning” in it” (Monaco 2000:35).

Perhaps the reason that some say that dance means so much, is a hangover from elitist days of art appreciation. There may be a fear that if dance is just enjoyable, then it becomes just another consumer item, and there may be a little less magic in the world. So we must then invest dance with supernatural powers. Or perhaps we are still afraid of carnal pleasures and try to make kinaesthetic empathy an intellectual process.

I think rather that magic and mystery are where we find them. Often that is in the arts, because we often try to separate aesthetics from practicalities, but it can also be in the home, or in the shed. The sacred is in the profane, like the mind is in the body. In the writing of this thesis I was reminded of humanity's unique search for meaning. Like the writing (recording) of religious scriptures arising from ecstatic experience, the documentation, however faithful to the experience, can then be interpreted in ways other than what the ecstatic writer (or God, if she exists) first intended. Words cannot quite encompass the breadth and depth of that experience, but the interpretation still needs words, and they are the best tool we have, for believers and non believers alike.

Dance, as an extension of our language abilities might show the way.

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