



## Dancing Body as a Social Replica

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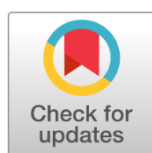
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**Abstract:** The dance as well as the art is a part of the life of each individual, but they are also a part of the general processes in society. Dance very frequently absorbs, and nevertheless at the same time reflects the conditions that are distinctive of a specific time and space. The dance body is a medium through which the reactions and responses to a specific problem or condition are articulated. In some examples, the body is used as an instrument to promote values often dictated by the centers of power and authority. However, the dancing body is also a channel through which one can follow reactions and answers to a real problems and hardship. This characteristic will be the subject of this analysis. The Middle Ages was chosen to show the manner and forms of reaction created in crisis situations. Although we have very few authentic sources for this period, it was an additional challenge to go deeper, to explore and to emphasize another function of the dance that is not aesthetic, yet socially engaged. The body is a strong articulator and although it is rarely included in general social research, it provides very interesting material and opportunities to decoded states, attitudes and positions on a collective level. The analysis deals with presenting events that feature the medieval period that have been followed and resulted in specific reactions shaped through several dance forms.

**Keywords:** Dance, Body, Religion, Crises, The Middle Ages

## 1. Introduction

The dance is a part of our life regardless the category it belongs to (ritual, social, artistic). What is most frequently assessed is its aesthetics, choreographic form, history, still through it we can determine certain tendencies, socio-cultural conditions current in a specific historical period. Ted Polhemus writes about "body as system of meaning" (Polhemus, 1975) but in this case we will paraphrase it in in *dance as system of meaning*. Conditions in society and their impact on movement and dance is an area that is increasingly researched (Thomas, 2003; Hewitt Andrew, 2005; Kuhlke, Pine 2015; Zdravkova Djeparoska, 2013, 2019, 2020). Can a dance reflect a particular

crisis condition, can it be an istrument dealing in times of hardship? The answer is affirmative. The social crisis reflection (which is the topic of this research) in the area of the dance is not visible and transparent in advance, nevertheless if we concentrate on the dance material that had been developing in periods of political, social, economic, moral hardship, it thereof manifests some identical features (regardless of the period and geographical location). Dance is not a hermetically sealed area, on the contrary, it does not only absorb influences, but it reacts in its own rather unique way.

In order to be able to detect this

phenomenon in times of crises, the social dances performed in the Middle Ages period have been selected. Generally, the beginning of the medieval period is associated with the collapse of the Roman Empire (5th century) and it timely extends to the Renaissance period, concentrating primarily on the territory of Western Europe. In the actual group, having concluded from the available sources, as well as the dance form and aesthetics, we have selected the dances established in the period of the late Middle Ages (XII-XIV century).

## 2. Historical context - religion

The change of polytheism with monotheism on the territory of Europe imposed a different moral-ethical code in which the glorification of man (analogously of the human body) was substituted by the glorification of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christianity at the time of its formation represented a binary concept of emphasizing a God-man that had happened as an influence of the Judaic fraction and Plato's line of the divine nature domination (Eliade, Mircea, 2005). The imposition and the struggle for supremacy of one of the two, more precisely of the second, signified the severance of all the bodily attributes and the domination of the spirit.

In a complex historical context, the idea itself of a divine spirit had to be supported by the tendency to repudiate and obliterate the carnality and at the same time to associate it with vice and sin. Therefore, every bodily activity was renounced and an attempt was made to invalidate all bodily characteristics. Among Christian an ascetic medieval saints who lived from the 13th to the 17th century (Umiliana de' Cerchi, Margaret of Cortona, and Angela of Foligno), Rudolf Bell found anorexia. This health phenomenon confirms the thesis of the necessity to obliterate the carnality in this case the denial of sex itself. Anorexia, which is characterized by an obsessive need to reduce weight, in this case not caused by fulfilling some determined aesthetic criteria (which is present today), but rather by the need to annul all visible features of the female body, and at the same time to interrupt the natural physiological processes related to reproductive ability (menstrual cycle, and thus the possibility of pregnancy). Bell writes: "Early in her saintly career the holy anorexic fully commands the war against her body and therefore suffers deeply at every defeat, whether it is a plate of food she gobbles down or a disturbing flagellation by nude devils and wild beasts ... Changes in hormonal balance, fueled by the psychic effect of sustained mental prayer, suppress the life-preserving needs for nourishment and rest." (Bell, 2007).



**Figure 1** "Mocking Christ", Church of St. George in Staro Nagorichane, Kumanovo, Macedonia.

Analogously, dance as a result of physical activity was anathematized, while the representation of the dancing body was equated with satanic actions. In the late medieval period depictions of frescoes with presentations of dancing figures are very rare. The dancing body is a body possessed by demonic forces. One of the few frescoes depicting poses of dancing bodies is located in Macedonia. This is the fresco "Mocking Christ" which is located in the church of St. George in Staro Nagorichane, Kumanovo, painted in 1317/1318 (figure 1). On it, besides Christ, traveling performers are represented, present in this area in the Middle Ages, known as *skomrahi*. They are depicted on fresco with instruments and costumes used in their performances in which had been included dance elements (Pavlovski, 2004; Lužina, 2007).

The specific position of rejecting everything that means physical activity had double meaningful effect on the dance. On the one hand, this sphere was not fixed, registered and neatly recorded, nor was there a strategy for its development resulting in a meagre database. Nevertheless, on the other hand, this relationship gave an opportunity for free and non-canonical development of the dance, which pretty thoroughly recorded the conditions and reflected them into dancing movement which have been a feature in this period.

### 3. Historical context - society

The medieval period with its tectonic movements that were a product of the necessity to establish church norms and their imposition as a single governing model. From other side the formation of borders of new states (and their permanent revision), the inability to meet basic existential needs led to serious conditions of stipulated questions and dilemmas. The traditions of paganism were still very strong, and the ecclesiastical philosophical concept, despite its ferocity and dogmatism, did not offer any acceptable solutions (belief in God had not reduced the hunger and had not offered a way out of the crises, nor had stopped the galloping deadly balances of epidemics). The church itself had many problems in its own ranks, one of the most significant events being the Great Schism of 1054, better known as the Eastern Schism which

represented the separation of the Eastern and Western Churches. Western schism divided Western Christianity into two papal centers - Rome and Avignon. In the period 1095-1270 the church fought seven crusades followed by many casualties. Pope Gregory IX in 1233 introduced a spiritual court (inquisition) that persecuted and punished heretics, many (mostly women) of whom were accused and executed. Despite the zealous implementation of "God's law", the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century brought severe food shortages, especially in Flanders and Germany, which resulted in an increase in hunger mortality.

An additional threat to Europe's population was the outbreak of epidemics. In 1348, Italian sailors from Asian countries transmitted the plague. It spread rapidly, occupying the territories of Italy and France, for the following 1349 to be transferred to England and Germany. Outbreak bursts of the plague are recorded by the chroniclers in 1366 and 1368. The huge number of deaths, on average every third inhabitant of Europe, as well as the inability to prevent the infection caused fear and panic among the population. Every segment of life was regulated by different centers which in one way or another sought to impose their own power, ended in a final outcome causing chaos. Jean Duvignaud in his book *Sociology of Theater* confirms this chaotic relationship and the struggle for supremacy between the secular and the spiritual power "As it was not the time of the rule of the church, the Middle Ages was not the time of feudalism reign alone, the two systems touched, confronted and exchanged their values, whereas at the same time opposed each other and remained clearly separated" (Divinjo, 1978).

### 4. Dance as medium of religious practices

The way of life and the conditions were reflected on the dance expression. A series of bizarre events characterize this period. People had articulated their needs through some unusual kind of new dance movement activities, openly opposing the existing order and creating a new one. The mass phenomenon registered in Italy in 1233, named by the contemporaries as the "Great Hallelujah", united groups of people dancing and thus expecting enlightenment. They moved in a

circle led by a "preacher" carrying twigs and candles. The groups took elements from the already postulated religious system (the use of candles, the borrowing of the term - hallelujah, etc.) which was a very strong attack on the established church norms. In the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the Rhine Valley as a result of a plague epidemics appeared manic phenomena that were reflected in the "St. Vitus" dance, as an illustration, the researcher Sachs cites the following song that dates from this period:

Amidst our people here is come,  
The madness of the dance.  
In every town there now are some  
Who fall upon a trance.  
It drives them ever night and day,  
They scarcely stop for breath.  
Till some have dropped along the way  
And some are met by death." (Sachs, 1937)

Historians had been taking notes of identical phenomena on the territory of France. "Harried by plague, long wars, and endless misfortunes, and stirred to the depths of their being, hosts of distracted people roll westwards from place to place. Singly or hand in hand they circle and jump in hideously distorted choral dances-for hours at a time, until they collapse foaming at the mouth" (ibid) The mass psychoses characteristic of this type of dance had been written down by several chroniclers in their records. Leo von Rožmítal noted an example of a recomposition of existing church practice in the mid-fifteenth century as a recurrence of medieval influences. During his stay in Germany, in 1466 he registered an enormous mass of people practicing unusual activity. On a certain day of the year, it was customary to dance on a nearby mountain from sunrise to sunset, so that after the performance, the participants were so exhausted that they were carried back to their homes loaded on carriages, completely motionless and lifeless. The participants in this new "ritual" explained their need to repent before God for their absence in religious practice that occurred many years ago. As a redemption, they gathered on the same day each year to perform their "penitent" dance. People could express their repentance through sequence of activities offered by the church, however

instead, they created their own model in which they collectively created patterns of behavior. The dance ventures which were a parallel system especially in the medieval period, tried much more to redefine the established religious norms rather than to supplement them. The formulation of a new medium where the dance played a key role and its own choice knowing that the dance represented a direct link to demonic forces is interpreted as a way to create new religious practices. Ritual elements can also be found in such performances, but they were a direct projection of the social organism condition which at that time had been functioning very chaotically. John Waller underline correlation of hard live conditions and the appearance of these dance forms "But the dancing plagues and the experiences of demoniac nuns still have something to tell us about human responses to stress. For these events place in bold relief the extraordinary power of context to shape how anguish and fear are expressed" (Waller, 2009). This form of dance is most often associated with members of the lower social ladder, who felt the most the blows of the current situation and hardships.

## 5. Dansemania

The phenomenon of the emergence and rapid growth of *dansemania* is interpreted as a way to channel the emotional state and move to a new dimension in which, at least for a short time, all the troubles that followed life will be avoided and salvation will be sought. "An ominous phenomenon referred to as *danseomania* occurred in the Middle Ages. It was characterized by large numbers of people, often entire town populations, dancing until they collapsed or died of exhaustion.... People thought that this mania for dancing was the result of witchcraft, bite of the tarantula spider, or intervention of the devil. More enlightened men, however, diagnosed *danseomania* as resulting from group hypnosis, sexual excitement, contaminated food, or hysterical symptoms of merriment." (Lee, 2002). This issue has been studied by several authors (Midelfort, 1999; Waller, 2009).

The pharmacologist Louis Backman has an interesting hypothesis about *dansemania*. It is associated with ergometrine poisoning - an alkaloid of the fungus rye horns (*Secale Cornutum*) that attacks the grain rye during rainy and humid

periods. Symptoms of poisoning included hysterical, convulsive movements typical of dansemania. Beckman proves that the periods of dansemania coincide with the years when there was unusually heavy rainfall. Evidently, the theses on ergometrine poisoning explain the effects present in this phenomenon, only that they had their basis in the social status and general condition because in the centuries that followed there were periods of heavy rainfall and the development of *secale cornutum* in cereals, but dansemania with all associated manifestations had never been registered again.

## 6. Dance as a link between death and life

Another example is the attempt to unify the population through dance. Very popular during the Middle Ages in Western and Northern Europe was the *Dance of Death*. The dance arouses research interest for authors from different periods (Sachs, 1937; Krasovskaya, 1979; Akindinova and Amashukely, 2015). This dance is another confirmation of the creating tendency, i.e. the projecting unity through the dance movement. „The preaching of contempt for earthly joys, among which a person should not forget about the afterlife, was reflected in the theme of the *dances of death* ... The Middle Ages addressed this topic, betraying the fear of the end, saying that all people are equal in the face of death“ (Krasovskaya, 1979). It is usually represented as a chain of moving figures with a very simple choreographic and proxemic drawing. The dance "captured" the participants – in trance they would follow the leader, who was searching the way for them, by closing and opening the chain. There are many pictures, illustrations and songs dedicated to this dance which is a confirmation of its popularity. Why did the Middle Ages want to pour out a mixture of ideas about death and its connection to the dance medium? Sachs finds several reasons for the incredible popularity of this game. The first is the connection between living and death in dance, which is a direct reflection of the ritual sphere, i.e. the ability of the movement to make a connection between the parallel existing existential levels. The second is the displaying of a form of movement inherent in death, a simulation of the state to come, that is, to be expected. The third aspect is dancing

as a warning sign of death and departure from life with a message of equality. Regardless of the interpretive discourse, the dance and the death are understood as an ambivalent force that is causally related, as evidenced by the above poem (written by an unknown author) in the fourteenth century. The song is dedicated to death, which is often visually depicted in medieval plays as a human skeleton with scythe in its hands:

His cruell daunce no man mortall can stent  
Nor lede his cruell cours after his intent  
The pope nor Emperour, if they be in his hande  
Hath no maner myght his sore cours withstande

.....  
The byssshop, lorde, the Pore man, lyke a state  
Death in his daunce ledyth by the sleue. (Sachs, 1937)

Medieval people were permanently under threat of death, it was constantly present and its proximity was felt strongly. However, in parallel with the approaching force simulation, they very clearly conveyed the message of equalizing the status groups. These types of dances promoted the concept of equality at least when it came to death, as opposed to the actions of the church, which emphasized differences and offered certificates of class separation and remission of sins (indulgences). The masses wanted and accepted to receive new and strange experiences through the medium of dance and movement which for them were related to some untouchable experiences.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite the different views, all the theses presented about the *Dance of Death*, as well as other examples of activities confirm that the dance was a parallel "religious" key through which rapprochement was achieved, as well as "prophylactic" procedures about the conditions that were part of the way of existence in this period. At the same time, they were a sign of revolt and a response to the current situation. The message in these performances is not directed towards God or towards death, but to the living and those who have modelled the norms and rules of living. The principle of self-determination is

especially distinctive, which has been articulated through manic and trance states.

Conditions of crises, transitions and pressures made an impact on the dance matter. The body becomes a channel of creating a new social message that is a part of these dance procedures, and the dance is an instrument through which the desired state is accomplished. In the medieval socio-kinesthetic layer there is a need to create an individual or collective space in which simulation is performed and an attempt is made to somehow reorganize the real context, creating a new and self-realization / self-definition in it thereof (at the cost of having it only during the time of the event). Few sociologists studying the movements of societies in general have paid attention to popular social dances, stipulating them in the sphere of complementary, "marginal" activities. Namely, dance in certain examples defines very clear messages that should be adequately read/decoded and interpreted.

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