Repetitions and Variations: The Embodied Cultural Memory of Ballet

The corporeal practice of ballet training, comprised of visual and aural input along with kinesthetic awareness and sensation, serves to transmit and reify a specific form of embodied knowledge. Passed from generation to generation and body to body, from at least the mid-19th century to present-day, systems of ballet training and modes of ballet performance have moved through history continually enacting and reenacting a legacy of repertoire rife with collective/cultural memory and meaning. Ballet training methodologies have evolved, yet well-established vocabulary, syllabi, and curricula continue to be followed as pedagogical foundations for developing technical and artistic skills. And, while new choreographers expand the limits of the established ballet vocabulary and the growing body of ballet repertoire continues to evolve, the traditional classical ballets (think *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*) are enduringly re-produced and celebrated as a valuable part of the heritage of ballet culture. Given this continually evolving yet perennial nature of ballet, theories from the field of performance studies provide an interesting lens through which we might examine classical ballet and its repertoire. This presentation frames ballet as a living culture—an ever-evolving, self-perpetuating, way of life—while engaging with scholars such as Raymond Williams, Eric Hobsawm, Joseph Roach, and Diana Taylor to explore notions of culture, tradition, ritual, orature, and repertoire.

**Keywords:** Ballet, culture, repertoire, embodiment, tradition, ritual, orature, performance

An enterprising ballet dancer enters a spacious, airy dance studio prepared for the ritual of daily ballet class, exhibiting a deference not only for the space but for the history and discipline of the art. The voices of the dancers already in the space are hushed in respect. The atmosphere is filled with the ghosts of dancers past, ancestors that assisted in the dissemination of this repeated embodied tradition. The dancer embraces this heritage and, as generations of dancers have done before, assumes first position, checks the nobility of her alignment in the mirror, places her left hand on the barre, and begins with a plié.

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enduringly re-produced and celebrated as a valuable part of the heritage of ballet culture. Given this continually evolving yet perennial nature of ballet, theories from the field of performance studies - particularly those theories that deal with culture, tradition, ritual, and repeated embodied practices - provide an interesting lens through which we might examine classical ballet and its repertoire.

To frame this discussion, it is worth noting that I consider ballet a living culture—that is, an ever-evolving, self-perpetuating, way of life. This belief is interwoven throughout both my academic work and my lived experience. Having stated this conviction, I willingly acknowledge the complexity of that assertion and its fraught nature. To begin, I agree with cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams, who reasoned that culture is one of the most multifaceted and complicated words in the English language, and I lean on Williams’s assertion that culture “indicates a particular way of life, whether of people, a period, a group, or humanity in general.”¹ Williams’s use of the phrase “way of life” is echoed by cultural theorist Judith Hamera when she argues that the practice of dance technique might become a “way of living” within communities of dancers.² Further, cultural anthropologists Daniel G. Bates and Fred Plog define culture as “a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that is transmitted from generation to generation through learning.”³ With these notions of culture in mind, we can recognize that culture is not just what is shared among contemporaries, but it is also what is preserved and perpetuated through generations. And these explanations of culture support the notion of ballet as living culture.

**Tradition & Ritual**

In an ongoing attempt to define what I mean by ballet as a living culture, I am repeatedly drawn to notions of tradition and ritual—terms that often overlap, bleed into one another, and are sometimes difficult to disentangle. *Tradition* and *ritual* are particularly significant to this discussion because they are repeated practices that represent cultural ideologies. I glean my conceptual understanding of tradition primarily from historian Eric Hobsawm who argues that tradition is manufactured. Hobsawm sees traditions as sets of practices that are symbolic or ritualistic in nature and invented with the purpose of perpetuating “certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”⁴ So, *traditions* might be defined simply as a set of repeated practices that are valued by a culture or community and fulfill specific ideological functions. Ballet is certainly rife with repeated practices and cultural ideologies. One example of tradition

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¹ Williams, 90.
² Hamera, xi.
³ Bates and Plog, 7.
⁴ Hobsawm and Ranger, 1.
within ballet culture might be the formal dress code expected for ballet classes. Although not enforced in all ballet classroom settings, there is generally an expectation in conservatory ballet training for a specific dress code: female ballet dancers often wear pale pink tights and a black leotard (or a specific color leotard that represents a placement level), while male ballet dancers often wear black tights and a fitted white top. This practice perpetuates ideological functions in the following ways: First, by the unfettered display of physical bodies which reinforce notions of the body as an instrument or tool; second, by the color-coded rankings and by students generally being dressed differently than the instructor which reinforces a hierarchy; and third, gender-specific expectations for attire reinforce a binary performance of gender.

The concept of ritual is intimately linked to the notion of tradition, and a sense of ritual within the activities of ballet culture is common. In a documentary film about American Ballet Theatre, the opening narration by ballet historian Jennifer Homans reflects on the ritualistic nature of ballet:

If you’re a dancer, and you stand at the barre every morning, in these positions which have been proscribed for over four hundred years . . . you go through this ritual, it’s a ritual of repetition, it’s a ritual of physical discipline.

This is only one of many examples of how ballet dancers express personal experiences in which they focus on the ritualistic nature of ballet practice. Ritual, according to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, implies a sacred nature in which essential and generic human bonds are recognized as defining characteristics of society. Turner discusses ritual as a means of navigating transitions, for individuals and collectives, through rites of passage. Within ballet culture, there are also rites of passage. Take for example, the celebration when a young dancer earns her first pair of pointe shoes. Or, the manner in which the annual tradition of The Nutcracker ballet provides an opportunity for dancers to progress through the ranks – from a mouse, to a child in the Act I party scene, to a more technically advanced role in Act II’s “Land of Sweets.”

Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell defines rituals as actions in which the conceptual orientations of beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths might be expressed. By arguing that ritual consists of social praxis, a “strategic way of acting” that promotes a “particular cultural strategy,” Bell approaches the concept of ritual as a means of exploring “cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds.” When the study of ritual is applied to researching particular cultures, the rituals can be viewed as culturally produced texts; and the performative nature of these rituals makes them productive sites

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5Mauss, 70-88; Alexias and Dimitropoulou, 87-104.
6Daly, 57-66; Prest, 229; and Tomic-Vajagic, 89-105.
7Novack, 34-48; Fisher and Shay; Murray.
8Burns.
Bell, 3.
for analysis and interpretation. If we adopt Bell’s understanding of ritual and its implications, then we might look at the practice of *reverance* as a ritual practice. *Reverance* is typically a slow, follow-the-leader sort of exercise at the end of ballet class, which often includes some sort of bow or curtsey to signify the end of the “performance.” As the term *reverance* implies, there is something reverential in the nature of participating in the formality of this exercise. As a student, I was taught that *reverance* was a significant moment for acknowledging due respect for the instructor, the accompanist, and the art form. Thus, *reverance* might be seen as fulfilling the role of ritual through an active performance of acknowledging power relations between teacher and student while reinforcing beliefs concerning the innate value of the lineage of classical ballet practice. While these examples are few, performed traditions and rituals are ubiquitous throughout ballet culture.

**Orature & Repertoire**

Performance studies scholar Joseph Roach\(^{11}\) claims that performance and collective memory are interdependent, simultaneously nourishing one another, as well as creating and re-creating one another. Further, Roach asserts that collective memory is cultivated and perpetuated through the performance of *orature*, which he defines as a “range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals.” In the study of culture, written texts are often considered inadequate or incomplete means of representation, and Roach argues that *orature* must be combined with literature for a truer representation or understanding of any cultural or historical reality. Insisting that literature and *orature* “have produced one another interactively over time,” Roach argues for the importance of both and gives a compelling rationale for considering each correspondingly when studying cultures.\(^{12}\) In this use of the term orature, we might consider all of the classical ballet canon, the traditional ballet class structure, the pedagogies and customs of ballet as part of ballet culture’s orature.

Another performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor, follows Roach’s line of thought, arguing against the traditionally accepted practice of valuing the concrete, tangible artifacts of the archive over the lived physical and repeatable practices of the *repertoire*. Taylor uses the term *repertoire* to describe “embodied and performed acts” that “generate, record, and transmit knowledge”\(^{13}\) and argues that “embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archives ability to capture” the essence of performance.\(^{14}\) Compellingly, Taylor expands her thoughts on the performed repertoire stating:

\(^{11}\)Roach.
\(^{12}\)Roach, 45.
\(^{13}\)Taylor, 21.
\(^{14}\)Taylor, 20.
The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission . . . the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.\(^ {15} \)

The domain of classical ballet provides an interesting site for explorations into how tradition and ritual contribute to the construction of an embodied collective/cultural memory that has been and continues to be perpetuated through the mechanisms of orature and repertoire. Roach’s and Taylor’s theories, in particular, provide a lens through which we can examine ballet, specifically in terms of how knowledge is produced and communicated, and how a collective/cultural memory specific to ballet practitioners is cultivated and perpetuated.

I surmise that most ballet practitioners, as well as any others involved in the performing arts, would sympathize with Roach’s and Taylor’s assertions that the archive, with its tangible artifacts, is limited. After all, an abundance of literature exists in the areas of ballet pedagogy, ballet history, and the classical ballet repertoire; however, written materials are simply not adequate to effectively perpetuate the art form and practice of ballet. Texts provide theoretical insight, and are thus invaluable, but they cannot replace the physical experience of taking classes, rehearsing, and performing. The embodied knowledge of ballet practice is not learned primarily through words and texts, but rather through repeated physical bodily practices, by visual and aural input, and by kinesthetic awareness and sensation. The ancestral sense of communication passed down through generations is a vivid example of Roach’s insistence on the importance of orature in cultural study. Collective/cultural memory is cultivated and perpetuated through human interaction and personal experience, through rehearsals, classes, performances, lectures, spoken and unspoken conversations, written and unwritten texts and practices. As ballet historian Jennifer Homans writes: “the ballet repertory is not recorded in books or libraries: it is held instead in the bodies of the dancers.”\(^ {16} \)

### Repetition

In each of the concepts mentioned above—tradition, ritual, orature, and repertoire—repetition is key. In his attempt to define the problematic term performance, Roach leans on Richard Schechner’s use of the term “restored behavior” and proceeds to define performance as “that which can be repeated, rehearsed, and above all recreated.”\(^ {17} \) The significance of repetition is crucial here. Roach writes: “…repetition is an art of recreation as well as restoration.”\(^ {18} \) In the world of ballet practitioners, the concept of repetition

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\(^ {15} \)Taylor, 20.
\(^ {16} \)Homans, xix.
\(^ {17} \)Roach, 46.
\(^ {18} \)Roach, 61.
holds an almost sacred or spiritual connotation: the classical ballets are continually reconstructed and repeated; the repetition of daily classes is a must for attaining and maintaining physical endurance and skill; the daily ballet class itself has a specific order of exercises that build in intensity and seldom vary in the order of execution; and within the canon of ballet training, ballet dancers will repeat the exact same exercises an exorbitant number of times throughout a career. Compellingly, Roach troubles the idea that repetition is stagnant or devoid of variation by connecting the concept of repetition to the notion of imagination. He writes:

The paradox of the restoration of behavior resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself; no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisatory behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination.19

As a dancer, there is something appealing about the notion of repetition resulting in, or being a result of, imagination; and this particular stance provides a persuasive argument against those who consider ballet mindless mechanical replication and mimicry. Ballet training demands the skill and precision of the human body, honed through years of repetition in an effort to master classical ballet technique. And, by applying Roach’s stance, one might comprehend that while the technique is difficult and rigidly structured, it is not a cage; rather, a solid technical foundation provides the dancer with a physicality that enables the artist to be expressive in ways that would be otherwise impossible.

One way we might apply this theory to ballet is by considering the classical ballet variation. Although Gail Grant, in the iconic Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet, defines variation as simply “a solo dance in a classic ballet,”20 this seems an oversimplification. Historically, ballet has been intricately linked to classical music, and variation is a term adopted from this musical influence. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the musical term variation as:

A basic music technique consisting of changing the music melodically, harmonically, or contrapuntally. The simplest variation type is the variation set. In this form of composition, two or more sections are based on the same musical material, which is treated with different variational techniques in each section.21

Generally, a variation is played after a theme with the variation being slightly more ornate; in several cases there are many variations upon a single theme, and a repeating structure supports the nature of the function. Put plainly, the word variation implies repetition. In ballet, the term variation refers to a

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19Roach, 46.
20Grant, 149.
21Brittanica.com.
choreographic pattern, with a corresponding established piece of music, that may be physically manipulated by individual artists in terms of space, time, and energy. While each version of a particular ballet variation may have a standard choreographic plan, the term variation actually implies the freedom for different interpretations, allowing for Roach’s assertion that the collective/cultural memory may be reinvented or reinterpreted through imagination. In fact, the artistry of individual ballet dancers is often evaluated by the manner in which they interpret the variations embedded in the canon of classical ballets.

Moreover, variations are traditionally taught to a younger dancer by an older dancer that has performed the role, thus leaving the process inevitably open to changes and alterations. This fact also speaks to the notions of culture mentioned above in which there is an emphasis on the repertoire being passed from generation to generation. Homans writes that “even dancers with superlative memories are mortal, and with each passing generation, ballet loses a piece of its past.”22 As time progresses, each generation moves farther away from the point of origin, dancers’ bodies and the technique evolve; change, adaptation, and variation are unavoidable.

Reverence

Considering Roach’s definition of orature, which includes customs, rites, and rituals, the culture of ballet provides a seemingly endless litany of interesting subjects for investigation. Traditional ballet customs are performed extensively and range from universal manners of dress and deportment to rituals for preparing shoes and applying make-up. Classroom attire is comprised of leotards, tights, legwarmers, and skirts. Specific footwear is mandatory. Ballet dancers’ signature elegant posture and carriage is almost a performance in itself. Internationally, dancers wish each other an ironic ‘merde!’ before a performance and unite in the sanctity of practicing reverence at the end of each class. Thinking more broadly, outside of the ballet community itself, signifiers of ballet are ingrained in our collective cultural memory: pink tights, tutus, pointe shoes, tiaras, swans, and fairies. These oratures are repeated, rehearsed, recreated, restored, and reinvented exponentially continuing the development of a multi-faceted collective/cultural memory.

Ballet technique has evolved into a global form of embodied, corporeal knowledge, and a product of a collective/cultural memory of a ballet community that extends not only geographically, but also temporally. Passed down from generation to generation, body to body, ballet moves through history enacting and continually re-enacting a prescribed, and yet malleable and imaginative, repertoire. Performance studies theories that grapple with notions of collective memory, tradition, ritual, orature, repertoire, and repetition, support a fresh examination of ballet practice as a means of transmitting embodied culture from one generation to the next. Acknowledging

22Homans, xx.
the meaningful functions of these practices opens up opportunities for inquiry and exploration into how the legacy and heritage of ballet perpetuates hierarchies, allows for subversive acts, and maintains a physical cultural practice through the body as living archive.

The ballet class comes to an end. Mingled with the refined and regal ambience is the musty aroma of sweat and effort. Accompanied by the strains of an adagio played on a lone piano, the dancers face the mirror and the ballet mistress. Stepping in unison, they perform graceful port de bras, sweeping curtseys, and elegant bows. The spirits of the great artists and teachers from the past partake in the homage as the physical practice and living culture of the art form of ballet once again regenerates and endures.

References


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