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CHOREOGRAPHY AS AN AXIOLOGICAL AND EMBODIED CULTURAL PRACTICE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING DANCE BEYOND AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION

The purpose of the article is to substantiate a cultural-studies interpretation of choreography as an axiological and embodied practice that functions not only as an aesthetic form but also as a mechanism of cultural memory, identity formation, social communication, and symbolic processing of collective experience. Particular attention is paid to choreography within the contemporary Ukrainian wartime context, in which dance practices acquire additional significance as instruments for maintaining cultural continuity, collective solidarity, and symbolic self-expression. **The methodology** is based on an interdisciplinary combination of cultural-studies, axiological, semiotic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and cultural-anthropological approaches. The study also incorporates the concepts of cultural memory, social choreography, and culturally mediated embodied forms of experiencing and processing traumatic experience. **The scientific novelty** lies in the development of a six-level cultural-studies model of choreography as an embodied and axiological practice. The proposed model distinguishes semiotic-hermeneutic, axiological, phenomenological-embodied, ritual-liminal, socio-ideological, and therapeutically relevant levels of analysis, which are interpreted as interconnected dimensions of a single cultural phenomenon. **The conclusions** prove that choreography cannot be reduced exclusively to stage aesthetics or physical activity because it represents a complex multi-level cultural practice integrating symbolic, bodily, social, and axiological dimensions. Ukrainian choreographic culture in wartime conditions performs an important function in preserving collective memory and identity, particularly through regional dance traditions and forms of communal synchronisation. The prospects for further research are connected with empirical investigations of culturally grounded choreographic practices in rehabilitation, education, and the symbolic processing of cultural trauma.

Keywords: axiology of dance, choreography, cultural memory, cultural studies, ritual-liminal action.

Самойленко Святослав Сергійович, аспірант Національної академії керівних кадрів культури і мистецтв, голова циклової комісії сучасного естрадного танцю, викладач фахового коледжу Київської муніципальної академії естрадного та циркового мистецтв.

Хореографія як аксіологічна та тілесно втілена культурна практика: теоретичні основи розуміння танцю поза межами естетичної репрезентації

Мета роботи полягає у теоретичному обґрунтуванні культурологічного розуміння хореографії як аксіологічної та тілесно втіленої практики, що функціонує не лише як естетична форма, а і як механізм культурної пам'яті, формування ідентичності, соціальної комунікації та символічного опрацювання колективного досвіду. Особливу увагу приділено аналізу хореографії в умовах сучасного українського воєнного контексту, де танцювальні практики набувають значення інструменту підтримання культурної безперервності та спільнотної згуртованості. **Методологія статті** ґрунтується на міждисциплінарному поєднанні культурологічного, аксіологічного, семіотичного, герменевтичного, феноменологічного та культурно-антропологічного підходів. У статті також залучено концепції культурної пам'яті, соціальної хореографії та культурно опосередкованих форм тілесного переживання травматичного досвіду. **Наукова новизна** полягає у запропонованій 6-рівневій культурологічній моделі хореографії як тілесно втіленої та аксіологічної практики.

Модель виокремлює семіотико-герменевтичний, аксіологічний, феноменологічно-тілесний, ритуально-лімінальний, соціально-ідеологічний та терапевтично релевантний рівні аналізу, які розглядаються як взаємопов'язані виміри єдиної культурної практики. **Висновки.** Хореографія не може бути редукована виключно до сценічної естетики або фізичної активності, оскільки вона функціонує як багаторівнева культурна практика, у якій поєднуються символічні, тілесні, ціннісні та соціальні виміри. Українська хореографічна культура в умовах війни постає важливим механізмом підтримання культурної пам'яті та ідентичності, особливо через регіональні танцювальні традиції. Перспективи подальших досліджень пов'язані з емпіричним вивченням культурно адаптованих моделей хореографічних практик у процесах реабілітації, освіти та роботи з культурною травмою.

Ключові слова: аксіологія танцю, культурологічні дослідження, культурна пам'ять, ритуально-лімінальна дія, хореографія.

Relevance of the research. Present-day cultural studies increasingly interpret choreography not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon but as a form of cultural communication, a mechanism for the transmission of values, and a space for the symbolic processing of collective experience. Dance is a means of communication that comes before verbal speech, as a vehicle of value transmission, and as a locus of symbolic reorganisation of shared experience. However, a viewpoint on research that diminishes choreography to stage spectacle or physical exercise is still eminently prevalent. Such reduction, in our opinion, seriously limits the epistemological possibilities of choreology and cultural studies of dance.

The relevance of the topic is intensified by the contemporary Ukrainian wartime context, within which cultural practices associated with collective memory, identity continuity, and symbolic forms of self-expression acquire particular significance. Under conditions of social instability and traumatic experience, choreography may function not only as an artistic form but also as a socially meaningful embodied practice capable of maintaining communal cohesion and transmitting culturally significant behavioural models. Statistical data indicating the deterioration of mental-health indicators among the Ukrainian population during the first years of the full-scale invasion create a broader socio-cultural context in which the problem of culturally mediated forms of symbolic and embodied processing of traumatic experience becomes especially important.

At the same time, contemporary studies devoted to dance and movement practices frequently concentrate either on aesthetic representation or on the psychotherapeutic potential of movement, without sufficiently integrating these approaches into a broader cultural-studies framework. Existing semiotic, anthropological, and dance (movement) therapy studies often develop in parallel and remain insufficiently interconnected conceptually.

In this regard, the relevance of the present research lies in the necessity of developing a cultural-studies model of choreography that would allow dance to be understood as an embodied and axiological cultural practice without reducing it exclusively either to aesthetic discourse or to clinical interpretation.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Through a systematic review of current theoretical discourses on choreography, several lines of inquiry are identified, which develop in parallel in Ukrainian and international scholarly discourse, but which are rarely correlated in a joint conceptual framework.

The first line is that of cultural studies and of choreological research. Contemporary dance, as described by O. Bihus [2] is a phenomenon that needs the cooperation of philosophy, cultural studies and art history. According to D. Sharykov [10] choreology is an art-historical scholarly discipline and specificity of choreography is a language of "physical expression" which shows the inner world of human being and cultural identity. The category of "metamodernist synthesis" was proposed by S. Sadovenko [9] as a way to interpret the Ukrainian choreographic culture, where tradition is not preserved unaltered, but reinterpreted in an active manner. O. Vakulenko [3] offers a hermeneutic approach to the choreographic act of reading, stating that dance is a text that needs to be actively read. The actuality of axiological approach to dance as a mechanism of formation of personal value coordinates is confirmed by L. Savchyn [8]. The works of D. Karpenko [4], K. Kinder [6], N. Kvetsko [5], O. Babych [1] form a systematic layer of reflection in Ukrainian language, where choreography becomes a simultaneous heir of folk tradition and a place of its art work.

The second line is based on classic theoretical foundations. Social choreography, according to A. Hewitt [15] constitutes a theory of ideology in organised movement, dance for not only reflects social order, but rehearses it bodily. The anthropological conception of dance, proposed by J. L. Hanna [14] states that dance is a

particular form of non-verbal communication and is universal, intentional, rhythmical and culturally determined. The analytical apparatus of R. Laban [16] is still valuable as a basic language to describe the parameters of movement. The theoretical basis of understanding dance as a ritual structure with a liminal phase can be found in the work of V. Turner [17] and A. van Gennep [18]. It's through the prism of the "docile body," as proposed by M. Foucault [12] that it becomes possible to reconstruct the disciplinary regimes of choreographic pedagogy. S. Hall [13] offers a semiotic tool for analysing the production of cultural meanings through the choreographic image.

The third line focuses on research into dance/movement therapy as a culturally located practice. The collective monograph edited by R. Dieterich-Hartwell and A. M. Melsom [11] proposes DMT as a culturally sensitive way of doing things, based on the critical rethinking of the Eurocentric assumptions of the standard protocols. As a body of work, it is significant for the cultural-studies theory of choreography in that it indicates that an interpretation of the therapeutically relevant potential of dance is unthinkable outside its cultural context.

Thus, it is not a lack of the individual theoretical approaches, but a lack of integration between them in the existing literature. Choreological works focus on the structure and artistic language of dance; ritual-semiotic concepts focus on the symbolic and social aspect of dance; dance/movement therapy studies emphasize the embodied and psychological aspect of dance. The problem is that there has not yet been a cultural-studies model that would allow one to regard these levels not as the sum of externally combined interpretations but as interconnected dimensions of a single embodied cultural practice. This theoretical gap is particularly relevant to the situation of Ukraine during the war where cultural and psychosocial aspects of the impact of movement are more intertwined than usual.

Purpose of the article is to support a cultural-studies understanding of choreography as a praxis of the axiological (value-oriented) and embodied (body-oriented) in relation to cultural memory, identity formation and the psychosocially and therapeutically potential of the movement.

Main contents presentation. A conceptualisation of choreography as a cultural text is based on the semiotics and hermeneutics that suggest that a sequence of movements is not a "raw" biological act, but an utterance capable of being coded and interpreted. The artistic space of

a choreographic work, as O. Vakulenko [3] points out, has a structural similarity to the artistic space of an artistic text: it has composition, syntax, rhythm and an ordered sequence of images. But the specificity of this text is that it is not inscribed on a neutral medium, but on the human body, which is already culturally and biographically charged. This is exactly what we consider a characteristic of choreography, namely its duality: the textuality of movement and its embodied rootedness.

By using the S. Hall's [13] semiotic apparatus, this thesis can be elaborated: meaning is not contained in the movement, but is built in the perception and interpretation process, which has been mediated by cultural codes. For this reason, the same kind of gesture can be interpreted in opposite ways in different cultural settings: what is experienced in one culture as a gesture of grace can in another be coded as a gesture of status, gender subordination or ethnic markedness. It is to this end that A. Hewitt [15] calls the space of dance "social choreography": dance is not only an image of social structure, but also a space where this structure is literally inscribed in the body.

Importantly, the theoretical stance is reinforced by cultural-anthropological enquiries which do not differentiate between the embodied and the biographical components of movement performance. The dancer is not simply enacting a structure imposed on her or him by the choreographer, the dancer participates in the structure: the dancer lives it, the dancer brings his or her own biographical, kinaesthetic and cultural memory to bear. An analysis of choreographic text that does not consider the subjective dimension of the performer thus has the danger of becoming formalistic. This means that a cultural-studies perspective on choreography needs to be textual-semiotic and attuned to the embodied-biographical nature of the practice of dance.

The axiological approach, which was always presented by L. Savchyn [8] changes the focus from the aspect of what dance "depicts" to the aspect of what values dance transmits and consolidates. In the researcher's opinion, dance practice is an active subject in the process of forming the coordinates of the value of the personality and the cultural environment. We feel that it is necessary to make a more detailed specification of this thesis along five analytical axes: body, space, rhythm, community, and norm.

Body as an axiological category is not a given, but is a cultural artefact that is value-laden. With each dance tradition, a certain model of "correct" body is offered: classical ballet, the

elongated light controlled body; folk dance, accentuates rootedness, strength, a connection to the earth; contemporary dance, starting with M. Cunningham, democratizes corporeality as an "everyday body" [1]. When so viewed, an axiological analysis of choreography requires the explication of the cultural ideal that is carried out in the aesthetics of each practice.

Space in dance is not an empty container, but a value structured space. The circle structure of the round dance ties in into some values: equality and the closure of the community, while a frontal stage with a hierarchy of "soloist — corps de ballet" ties in into other values. In this context, R. Laban's [16] analytical apparatus is still useful as a tool for describing spatial parameters of movements without aestheticizing them.

Value-temporal orderings is the function of rhythm. Collective rhythm is the one that unites the community by embodied synchronisation; rapid rhythm is the one that unites the values of energy and vitality; slow rhythm unites the values of contemplation and ritual solemnity. Community is not only a subject of sociological analysis in dance: the dance group reproduces a particular model of collectivity, that of the egalitarian, the hierarchical, the gender-articulated, the open or the closed. Collective synchronisation is seen as a means of maintaining social solidarity in the times of communal crisis in folk dances examined by N. Kvetsko [5].

Finally, there is the dimension that is present in all the preceding: dance always takes place in a space of evaluative-normative oppositions, those of "right/wrong", "ours/foreign" and "permissible/impermissible". As M. Foucault [12] rightly notes, discipline of the body is not a by-product, but rather its mechanism by which the social subjects are produced. Choreographic pedagogy is, as such, a practice of norm creation as well as a technical practice.

The idea of combining choreography with the analysis of ritual is one of the most fruitful areas of cultural-studies research. The structure of rites of passage is classically defined by A. van Gennep [18] as a three-part scheme separation – liminal phase – reincorporation. The notion of liminality, as developed by V. Turner [17] is a condition "between" social positions with a more relaxed set of norms, where the values can be reassessed. Dance often falls right in the middle of this liminal space, both in the sense of archaic rites and in the sense of structured dance practice of today.

The choreographic concept of liminality serves at least three purposes. Firstly, it gives an anthropologically attested means to transcend the

repetitively played roles: the "father", the "daughter" or the "neighbour" becomes "open" in the ritual dance. Second, in the liminal state, the formation of collective communication emerges in which hierarchies are relaxed and, in Turner's terms, there is an increased sense of *communitas*. Thirdly, liminality is a condition that allows for the incorporation of negative (traumatic or ambivalent) experience into a new meaningful arrangement or setup — if there is proper social or work support.

With this in mind, it is no coincidence that contemporary dance/movement therapy is structured with the aim of reconstructing the very liminal space, a space in which the participant finds himself/herself in an environment that is other than everyday, where social markers become suspended, and where the opportunity is presented to live through, bodily, what cannot be expressed verbally [11]. This structural similarity between ritual dance and current DMT is, in our opinion, no coincidence—in both cases the capacity of the cultural human to transform through the body and the symbol is the basis. However, contemporary DMT can be understood as an institutionalised continuation of a rich tradition of culturally mediated movement practices for engaging with affect, which should not be confused with its clinical efficacy in specific diagnostic categories.

During the war, Ukrainian choreographic culture is manifested as a subject of external threat as well as as an active subject of cultural self-defence. According to the study by N. Kvetsko on the Boyko choreographic culture in the Carpathian foothills [5] mountain dance provides not only aesthetic but also supportive structures of bodily experiences: rhythmical repetition, communal synchronisation and codified communal space. In times of social turmoil, these institutions can serve as a means of maintaining continuity of identity and ritual-behavioural patterns.

The symbolic forms of Ukrainian folk choreography – the archetypal images – as pointed out by D. Karpenko [4] and K. Kinder [6] – could be a stabilizing resource in times of crisis. The Jungian-analytical interpretation offered by D. Karpenko allows folk dance to be viewed as codified collective experiencing, which is passed down through generations in the form of sequences of movement. In Ukrainian folk dance, K. Kinder finds an anthropomorphism which materializes the connection of the human body and nature.

Idealising the folk heritage as "healing" would be methodologically uncaring, however, to do so. Each tradition has been the result of many

choices, omissions and canonisations and, therefore, as well as having resourceful archetypes, they have normative restrictions. U. S. Sadovenko [9] argues a case for a ‘metamodernist’ position that seeks to recover tradition in a productive way, rather than maintaining its purity. It is, in our view, the most responsible stance, as it allows a critical revision without idealization of the resources from folklore that are still alive in the present.

Cultural trauma is an issue that must be addressed on its own. A. Pidlypska and L. Tsvetkova's work [7] cautiously attempts to combine the practice of choreography with strategies of working with cultural pain without reducing it to a clinical procedure. We perceive such a path to be the most fruitful: not only does it preserve the specificity of the material, but it also does not overestimate the psychotherapeutic value of it. It is important to note within the current debate that dancing can promote conditions for psychosocial stability only in the context of adequate cultural and professional accompaniment; outside these, claims of the ‘healing’ dimension of dancing are unwarranted, given available evidence.

One of the most vulnerable points of the existing cultural-studies literature on dance is its inclination towards a one-sidedly positive

interpretation of choreographic practice. Choreography is structurally ambivalent and, without denying the resources it is truly available to it, that must be recognized with appropriate prudence. The bodily practice which, in certain conditions, can gain a subject-restorative significance, under others conditions can be a place of disciplinary formation. The analytical tools provided by M. Foucault [12] provide a means of identifying this ambivalence: classical ballet training, in addition to virtuosity, instills in the pupil's body a limited set of “correct” posture, tempo, silhouette and gender attribution. The “docile body” is well seen in the disciplinary action of academic education.

It is precisely the ambivalent potential of choreography, we believe, that accounts for the fact that some types of dances offer a significant psychosocial resource, while others, conversely, heighten anxiety, project an idealized image of the body or re-create oppressive social norms. A theoretically sound cultural-studies model of dance thus must have an inherent component of critical reflection that would otherwise allow the axiological and psychosocial viewpoints to become rhetorical statements (Table 1).

Table 1

Ambivalent functions of choreography in cultural and psychosocial processes

| <i>Function</i> | <i>Constructive cultural effect</i> | <i>Possible risk or limitation</i> | <i>Theoretical implication</i> |
|--|--|--|--|
| Maintenance of cultural memory | Preservation of identity continuity under conditions of crisis [5; 6] | Canonisation of one version of tradition at the expense of regional variants | Need for a pluralistic approach to the folk heritage |
| Formation of bodily ideal | Development of physical literacy, posture, and kinaesthetic self-awareness | Internalisation of the normative canon of the “correct” body [12] | Need for a critical pedagogy of the body in choreographic institutions |
| Collective synchronisation | Reinforcement of the sense of belonging and <i>communitas</i> [17] | Pressure of conformity; marginalisation of “non-synchronous” participants | Need to balance cohesion with space for individuality |
| Working with affect under professional or culturally responsible accompaniment | Non-verbal channel for the expression of experience that resists verbalisation [7; 11] | Risk of re-traumatisation in the absence of qualified supervision | Distinction between spontaneous dance activity and structured DMT |
| Articulation of national subjectivity | Manifestation of cultural vitality in the public sphere [5] | Instrumentalisation of folklore; simplified decorative reproduction | Metamodernist stance as an ethically balanced strategy [9] |
| Axiological transfer | Transmission of life values through embodied experiencing [8; 14] | Uncritical reproduction of normative, gender-stereotyped codes | Combination of axiological and critical analysis as a theoretical standard |

Perhaps of greatest significance is the distinction of the levels of analysis, which are often confused in the literature available. They can be distinguished in the following way. The cultural-studies level sees dance as a cultural text, a value order, a ritual-liminal action, a vehicle of cultural memory, and a form of identity. The psychological level considers movement as a self-expression of the personality that is affective, embodied and symbolic.

The psychotherapeutic level is structured dance/movement therapy, where a professional specialist has to supervise the therapy, there are diagnostic indications, and a qualified specialist. Dance is understood as a tool for cultural subjectivity, representation and diplomacy on the socio-political level. These levels are analytically separable and must not be mixed in a statement unless there are special provisions.

The proposed model summarises six levels of the cultural-studies analysis of choreography, which do not replace one another but record different modes in which choreographic action

functions within culture. Table 2 presents the content of each level, the representative conceptual references, and the projection onto the Ukrainian cultural context.

Table 2

A six-level cultural-studies model of choreography as an embodied practice

| <i>Level of analysis</i> | <i>Core cultural meaning</i> | <i>Representative concepts / authors</i> | <i>Projection onto the Ukrainian cultural context</i> |
|---------------------------|---|--|---|
| Semiotic-hermeneutic | Dance as a codified cultural text requiring interpretation | S. Hall [13]; O. Vakulenko [3]; D. Sharykov [10] | Reading folk and academic forms as a living cultural lexicon |
| Axiological | Dance as a mechanism for the transmission and formation of value coordinates | L. Savchyn [8]; S. Sadovenko [9] | Preservation of the value structure of the community under conditions of cultural rupture |
| Phenomenological-embodied | Dance as a practice of the embodied-biographical living-through of cultural material | R. Laban [16]; O. Babych [1] | Restoration of trust in the body among populations affected by displacement and traumatic experience |
| Ritual-liminal | Dance as a form of rite-of-passage and collective transformation | A. van Gennep [18]; V. Turner [17] | Maintenance of collective practices of memory, mourning, and celebration |
| Socio-ideological | Dance as a space for the transformation or reconfiguration of socially established bodily norms | A. Hewitt [15]; M. Foucault [12] | Analysis of gender and class regimes within the Ukrainian stage tradition |
| Therapeutically relevant | Dance as a potentially integrative practice for working with affect under appropriate accompaniment | R. Dieterich-Hartwell, A. M. Melsom [11]; A. Pidlypska, L. Tsvetkova [7] | Work with cultural trauma among IDPs, veterans, and children affected by war as a subject of empirical verification |

Conclusions. The conclusions of the theoretical analysis allow the authorial model of embodied axiological practice of choreography to be summarised in five propositions. Firstly, Choreography is a multi-level cultural practice. The six-level model described in the article is an analytically distinguishable and yet interconnected model of six levels of choreographic action: the semiotic-hermeneutic, the axiological, the phenomenological-embodied, the ritual-liminal, the socio-ideological and the therapeutically relevant levels. Each of these levels is of a scholarly nature and cannot be reduced to another without loss of scholarly adequacy.

Secondly, the axiological dimension is of primary importance because dance is a vehicle for the transmission and the formation of body, space, a rhythm, a community and a norm. As such, no dance practice is culture free; it always reflects a specific value system, although participants may not be aware of this.

Thirdly, the Ukrainian wartime context puts choreography in the foreground as a practice that provides for the continuity of cultural memory and identity. Regional traditions, such as Boyko choreographic culture in the Carpathian foothills manifest themselves as means of preserving the

continuity of communal life in times of devastating social upheaval.

Fourthly, caution must be used when interpreting the therapeutic value of dance and it cannot be assumed to be clinically effective. Only with suitable cultural and professional accompaniment can dance practice maintain conditions of psychosocial stability – anything beyond this is beyond the scope of the current theoretical and empirical foundations.

Fifthly, other research should create culturally grounded models of choreographic practices and then test their existence in communities impacted by the war. Potential research areas involve the ethnographic reconstruction of regional dance forms, critical analysis of digital and screen-mediated choreographic versions and the development of culturally adapted Ukrainian protocols of working with movement in rehabilitation and education. When these lines of inquiry are completed, it will be possible to further define the theoretical parameters and conditions under which choreography can fulfill functions of cultural reproduction without being metaphorized clinically.

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