

# ***DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS***

**Dance and the Senses · Dancing and Dance Cultures in Urban Contexts**



**29th Symposium of the ICTM  
Study Group on Ethnochoreology  
July 9–16, 2016  
Retzhof Castle, Styria, Austria**

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Graz, Austria  
2017**

## Symposium 2016

July 9–16

International Council for Traditional Music

Study Group on Ethnochoreology

The 29<sup>th</sup> Symposium was organized by the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, and hosted by the Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz in cooperation with the Styrian Government, Sections 'Wissenschaft und Forschung' and 'Volkskultur'



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Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-8440-5337-7

ISSN 0945-0912

Shaker Verlag GmbH · Kaiserstraße 100 · D-52134 Herzogenrath

Telefon: 0049 24 07 / 95 96 0 · Telefax: 0049 24 07 / 95 96 9

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Helena SAARIKOSKI

DANCE KNOWLEDGE IN DANCERS' STORIES ABOUT THEIR LEARNING TO DANCE, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE "SENSE OF RHYTHM"

The present study is about the popular couple dance culture in Finland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The research material consists of written oral history narratives about dances in the writers' youth. It is shared dance knowledge that enables the inter-corporeal practices of couple dances. The qualities of this cultural knowledge are one of the focuses of my study. My argument goes for the experiential, embodied, inter-corporeal and multi-sensorial nature of dance knowledge, when studied in people's own stories about their dancing. As a specific question pertaining to the study of cultural senses, I will address the "sense of rhythm" which is constantly referred to as a prerequisite for dance ability in the stories.

*Keywords:* senses; popular; rhythm; modernization; Finland

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My study concerns the popular couple dance culture that prevailed in Finland from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to at least the 1970s, and even to the present day. In this paper, I review my research material in the light of the cultural study of the senses. In cultural anthropology a research tradition already exists regarding the sensorial orders of cultures. For example, a famous discussion concerns the culture-bound linguistic classification and perception of colors, with the supposedly or arguably universal traits and cultural variations (see, for example, Wierzbicka 2008). But cultural study of the senses is underrepresented (see Pink 2009). This is largely due to the fact that ethnographic study of the senses which I would take to be first and foremost the senses as understood by members of a given cultural community, is extremely difficult. I have found one good example to follow, Kathryn Lynn Geurts's 2002 study of the senses in an African community. There it becomes clear that the main difficulty in studying the senses is the unconscious nature of sensing. The act of perceiving is not a reflected one. Sensorial experience, or knowledge acquired through perceiving, is immediate and goes unquestioned and often also un-verbalized. So let us see where I can arrive at with my exclusively verbal, narrative research material.

The research material consists of written oral history narratives, or written recollections by dancers, elicited during an extensive inquiry by the National Museum of Finland, in 1991. There were altogether 543 respondents to this inquiry, from all over Finland and of different ages. The respondents were born between 1900 and 1961, one third of them in the 1920s; the active dancing period of the majority of respondents thus being the 1930s through to the 1950s.

There are especially two questions in this inquiry that produced material for the present discussion.

44. At what age did you learn to dance? Who taught you? To what kind of music? Do you remember what the first dance that you learnt was? And the next ones?  
[Nieminen 1991:23]

91. What do you think are the properties of a good dancer? Please, elaborate.  
[Nieminen 1991:29]

The majority of answers to the first question are short statements that simply name a dance type. For example, "I think it was the waltz that I first got into me, so to speak." In the question itself, the classification of dances into different dance types is assumed in the way that provokes answers of this kind. Anyway, this answering pattern sheds light into the question of what the dance types are, from an experiential point of view. I'll return to this point below.

Here is one of the most typical longer narratives that answers the first set of questions:

We rehearsed dancing secretly in the cowshed, guided by the servants of the house, there was no music, they sang and we got along well. First we learnt the mazurka, then the schottise and the polka. The waltz came later. Then later, when we went to real dances, we also learnt the tango. There were no dance courses, not at least in Kauhajoki [a parish in Southern Ostrobothnia]. Among friends we encouraged each other, and we were enthusiastic about learning. The first time I went to a dance was a work party of rye cutting. The dance was held in the threshing room, there was a good floor there. The village musician was there with his accordion. The young people of our village were there and some elderly folks too. There were people from other villages too, somebody had advertised. It was most exciting when the music started playing - oh, somebody came to bow for me<sup>1</sup>, I was so excited, could I even dance the way I had learnt. Thrilling it was, and funny - I got to dance and it felt like the beginning of a new time in my life. [NMF K37/129 1991]

The last sentence, telling about the beginning of a new life stage when beginning to go to dances, can be taken as a narrative of a rite of passage from childhood to youth. It was customary that children under the age of 16, or those who had not taken the first communion (as it is taken in the evangelical Lutheran church of Finland), could not enter the dances, because of their age. Younger children often rehearsed dancing or played dancing among peers but they could not enter a public dance event. The popular couple dance culture can be considered the youth culture par excellence of 20<sup>th</sup> century Finland, to be challenged only by the rock and disco cultures that took the dance floors from the 1970s onwards.

These dances were largely learnt from peers, from slightly older youngsters, siblings or neighbours. The popular couple dances formed a traditional repertoire [Taylor 2003], not codified by professional dance teachers or schools.

Since dancing was the prime form of socializing for young people and especially for potential partners, practically every young person had to learn the dances, and the skill was sometimes desperately sought after and highly valued when acquired.

In this quote, the rehearsing is clearly distinguished from really dancing. One possible reason for this is that the rehearsals very often were among a one-gendered group, but when really dancing in the frame of a couple, each gender had to be able to produce the gender-specific role of either leading or following the dance. The rehearsals also were among friends or relatives, but in a dance, you had to be able to perform with a stranger – so you could not know if you could dance the way you had rehearsed before actually dancing "for real."

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<sup>1</sup> The bow is the way of asking a girl to dance. According to the social norms, the girl cannot refuse the asking, so the bow already made her excited about her ability to dance the way she had learnt.

Learning to dance is of course a multisensorial experience, even if it is not always described so in the material. While some describe the learning process as being solely by watching others dance, and still others by imitating, there are also those who recount that they learnt to dance only by listening to dance music, hence it is clear that in the actual "learning how" to dance, all these senses are involved: listening to the music, sensing one's own movements and adjusting to a possible partner's, and also watching or remembering others dancing, that is, imitating or mirroring the movements of others.

In learning situations described in the material, there is always music involved. If they do not have a musician or radio or gramophone at their disposal, it is to the tune and time of their own singing that the rehearsals take place, like in the quote. Learning to dance the set step pattern in the time of each dance type is essential.

The "sense of rhythm" is very often named in the material as a prerequisite for learning to dance; and unanimously the "sense of rhythm" is deemed as essential for good skill in dancing. In this dance culture, you can say that people are above all valued according to their sense of rhythm. You have to know how to dance to be able to take part in social life in the first place, so without the sense of rhythm or with a poor sense of rhythm, you will be an outcast. A missing sense of rhythm is blamed for never having learned to dance. Skilled dancers are valued and followed. The one who is known to be a good dancer always gets the most dances. In sum, the better the sense of rhythm, the better the person, in this dance culture.<sup>2</sup>

Also dance music is appreciated according to its rhythmicity: a good orchestra is one that plays in time and rhythmically, and for an individual dance musician, like the accordionist in the quote, it is not a large repertoire or virtuoso playing that are valued, but the ability to "give rhythm to the dancers," as they say.

Reading and re-reading the material for analysis, I started to wonder what this famous sense of rhythm actually is. My initial suggestion is that the sense of rhythm is a "sense". It is particular to this dance culture and learned in it, to become a naturalized routine of the body. Likewise, the better-known senses of seeing and hearing, tasting and smelling, and movement and touching are conditioned and learned in culture and become naturalized and taken-for-granted routines of the body [Howes, Classen 2014:1–13].

A kind of minimum of the sense of rhythm, as recognized in the material, is to be able to hear the music actually played during a dance occasion whether they were playing "a tango, a waltz or something else" [NMF K37/495 1991]. To recognize a dance type after the music is played is of course a very specific skill, particular to this dance culture, and requires a lot of learning and of specified inside knowledge. Though, sheer knowledge – of the dance types and of the rhythm patterns accordingly – is not enough to enable one to recognize the rhythm actually played by hearing, let alone to enable one to perform the step pattern according to the rhythm and in time with the music which can be considered the next level of the sense of rhythm.

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<sup>2</sup> See Geurts [2002:236]: "What it means to be a person and notions about the kinds of persons that exist are directly tied to the senses that a cultural group recognizes, attends to, and incorporates into their way (or ways) of being-in-the-world."

By endless repetition the know-how of the sense of rhythm forms a "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" that are witnessed on the dance floors of Finland even today.

Hereby I refer to ethnologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of habitus, or the embodiment of history, culture and society, to become the routinized nature of the body. Habitus is an old concept, made known in the human sciences earlier by Marcel Mauss in his famous article "Les techniques du corps" in 1935 [Mauss 1973]. But I still think it is a good concept to think with when considering embodiment and the senses from a cultural angle, as to what in the senses is learned and shared in culture and how and to what effect that is done.

Bourdieu explicitly deals with the senses in this often quoted passage from the "Outline of a theory of practice":

the principle generating and unifying all practices [...] the *socially informed body*, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its *senses*, that is to say, not only the traditional five senses – which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms – but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humour and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on. [Bourdieu 1977:123–124; emphasis in the original]

And we could add, the sense of rhythm, in this dance culture.

Kathryn Geurts says of this passage on the senses that it is not theoretically explicit nor empirically developed, but what she takes from it is that "the conditioning of what and how you see, of what and how you hear, has an *isomorphic relationship* to the conditioning of what you consider moral, what you find funny, what is absurd, what is beautiful, and so forth" [Geurts 2002:243].

The less traditional "senses" are learned in culture during the development of the individual, in the same way as the conventional five senses are learned and conditioned by culture. What more is common to all the "senses" is that they unite mind, body, behavioural practices and cultural background [Geurts 2002:243]. The senses mediate the relationship between self and society, mind and body, idea and object [Bull, [...] 2006:5].

Translating Bourdieu's passage on the "senses" into Finnish, the language of the research, I have to use several different words instead of one equivalent for the word "sense" in English. In Finnish, which is a non-Indo-European language, there is no one concept for the kind of sense that Bourdieu figures. Sense meaning the five senses, and also the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, are readily rendered by the word *aisti*. Necessity and responsibility are understood as *tunne* (feeling). Direction is sensed by *vaisto* (instinct). Business demands *vainu* (scent). Responsibility and sacred in Finnish are rather known, *tunto*, than sensed – but *tunto* is also the word for touching sense. Common sense must be translated with *järki* (reason). Finally, *taju* (consciousness) is used for sensing what is real, tactical, proper, funny, absurd, moral, and practical – and rhythmical (*rytmitaju*). Moreover, the word *aisti* (sense) itself has probably been formed under the influence of the words *haistaa* (to smell), *haisti*

(smelling sense), and *vaisto* (instinct); and in dialects, it also has meanings like "reason, sense, mind; lust, will, whim; guts, anger; scent" [Toivonen 1995:10, s.v. *aisti*].

It may seem that Bourdieu is overexploiting the polysemy of the word sense, in order to pile his argument of the socially determined (and determining) body–mind on his various examples. On the other hand, the translation into Finnish reveals a complex semantic field, with neighbouring and traversing concepts and partly-synonyms, describing, all the same, the multiple channelling of the relationship between self and society, between body–mind and environment. Just thinking about the various renditions of Bourdieu's different "senses" into Finnish, "sense, feeling, instinct, scent, knowledge / touch, reason, consciousness," let alone augmenting the list with alternative translations, one is faced with the idea of a large, undefined and multiple network of concepts and words denoting concepts.<sup>3</sup> With this rich semantic field in mind, I find it easier to start to think beyond the pattern of "five senses," on a more comprehensive and more nuanced picture of the ways of sensory experience.

What do the senses do, or, what insight can be gained by interpreting the sense of rhythm to be a sense?

Culture affects the seemingly basic domain of sensation through the organization and elaboration of categories through which immediate sensations are perceived. The sensorial experiences will be encoded and performatively elaborated in speech, folklore, and rituals of the cultural community who recognizes that sense in their sensorium [Geurts 2002:5, 237; referring to Csordas 1993]. This equals to saying that perceiving is organized by cultural categories that become explicit in speech, folklore, and rituals and ceremonies.

In this dance culture, rhythm is perceived through the categories of dance types, that is, for example, the *mazurka*, the *schottise*, the *polka*, the *waltz*, and the *tango*, in the quotes. The repertoire of dance types mastered by an individual dancer forms the sensory order of the sense of rhythm – like the color types recognized in a given culture form the spectre of distinguishable colors for the members of that culture. When dance types are distinguished from one another by way of contrast, they also gain different symbolic value as contrasted to one another. Consider this last quote from the research material:

I loved the rhythm, to be able to move, held by another, sometimes vehemently like in the polka or the schottise, and sometimes in ecstasy, passionately in the tango rhythm, led by some lovely boy. [NMF K37/356 1991]

Dance types become cultural themes, or key symbols, through the kind of "sensibilities" described in the quote. Sensibility unites individual experience with perception, thought, cultural meaning, and social interaction. A sensibility is a field where habituated bodily sensations link to individual feelings, attitudes, orientations, and perceptions and finally to cultural themes, motifs, and ethos [Geurts 2002:17].

A cultural theme is a recurrent symbol that is found to repeat itself at different levels of culture and in different registers and codes. Cultural themes are key symbols [Ortner 1973], organizing experience in a specific cultural community. For example, we could take the *Finnish tango* and analyse it as a cultural theme, departing from mentions like this in the

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<sup>3</sup> See *rhizome* [Deleuze, Guattari 1987:2–25].

research material, then look at other texts written on it, analyse *Finnish tango* music and lyrics, trace the various dance events where *Finnish tango* is danced, and so on, all adding to the cultural meaning of the symbol "*Finnish tango*".

Within a dance type repertoire, different dance types tend to be, not only distinguished but evaluated in contrast to each other. For example, the *waltz* is known to be an older dance in the popular repertoire than the *tango*, and it also has some solemn importance that the *tango* has not. For example, a dance event always ended with a *waltz*, and the young man who danced this last *waltz* with a girl was usually supposed to escort her home, and this could result in a lasting relationship and even marriage – or the *wedding waltz* – of the two. Meanwhile, the *tango* has kept some of its contesting or counter-cultural value, from the days of the "tango ecstasy" of the 1950s and 60s. At that time, the *tango* was despised as an amusement of choice of common people in the countryside, who were the losers in terms of the rapid urbanization process going on at that time. *Tango* was also looked down on as music, by both the jazz musicians who were forced to play *tango* for long evenings in popular dance events for their living [Kontukoski 2012], and by the high-culturally oriented elite of the cities in general. So, the *tango* is perhaps nothing very elevated like the *waltz* can be, but the *tango* is something that really belongs to "us" and comes both physically and emotionally near "us", it is the "*Finnish tango*" – adding in this way also to the national identity, or understanding of what "Finnishness" is and consists of. The *waltz* on the other hand, does not carry such overtones of "Finnishness," except as being part of the repertoire of the "Finnish pavilion dances," considered today an important part of the national cultural heritage.

### **A macro-historical context**

As the senses are historically as well as culturally conditioned, I will look at the sense of rhythm in the context of the time period during which the couple dances were prevalent on popular Finnish dance floors. I present a sketch of a macro-historical context that can possibly serve as an interpretive frame for the centrality of the sense of rhythm in this dance culture.

The popular couple dance culture in Finland is definitely a modern phenomenon. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, groups of young people in rural villages first organized themselves as an age group (although also a class-based group of rural lower class). The couple dances and dance events organized for amusement were one of the grounding institutions of the organized youth groups and of a distinguished youth culture, as shown by folklorist and cultural anthropologist Matti Sarmela in his doctoral dissertation [1969]. The start of this dance culture – couple dances accompanied by popular hit music, danced for "amusement only" and not for ritual purposes, and the dance events organized by local youth groups – then coincides in time with the start of the modernizing processes of industrialization in Finland.

The transition from community-based social group dances to age group-based popular couple dances marked a major transition in marriage institutions, from parents and family-regulated marriage to personal choice and romantic love as the ground for intercourse and marriage. Evaluating peers as potential partners brought along the importance of personal interaction characteristics within the youth group, that is, the dances. In this way, skill in

popular couple dances became a necessity for social belonging in youth culture [Sarmela 1969:193].<sup>4</sup>

In the same time period, a major change occurred that affected all social rhythms of the Finnish people, brought about by the early developments of modernization, namely, a change in the concept of time. A universal clock-time, instead of a local time based on the sun's movements in the sky, and a minute schedule, were first introduced by the railroad, the first public line starting to operate in Finland in 1862. In 1921, universal primary school, compulsory for children from the age of seven, was introduced. Going to school and coming in time every morning, as well as leaving the school at the scheduled time every afternoon, was a huge lesson for all children, for their families and for the village school, in measuring time by the clock and keeping in time with it, something entirely new for most of the Finnish people and for the rural villages where primary school was first introduced in the first decades of the new century [Tuomaala 2006:245–246]. Efficacy and smoothness of new kinds of industrial work and of urban lifestyle demanded a new kind of adaptation to time which had to be acquired in only a few decades around the turn of the century [Tuomaala 2006:268; Sarmela 1979].

The beginnings of the big change in the concept of time coincide with dancing skill becoming the measure of a person's social worth. Now we do not have any possible data on the meaning of the "sense of rhythm" prior to this popular dance culture, or prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century which is narrated in memories. But it is tempting to assume that the central importance of the sense of rhythm in this dance culture has to do with the change in the concept of time. This would then be an example of embodying large and as such abstract cultural themes in sensorial bodily details. Dancing in time with rhythmic music would embody and stage the new social order of universal schooling, of mass mobility and urban lifestyle, of shifts in industrial work and in programmed leisure time, that Matti Sarmela has termed the "schedule society" [Sarmela 1979:19–22].

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<sup>4</sup> Bjurman [1998] describes a similar, although a hundred years earlier development in Sweden, of romantic love to become the ground for marriage and of personal characteristics as the "new dowries", as she puts it, among the youth of aristocracy and of rising bourgeoisie.

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**Link to original symposium presentation**

**Saarikoski, Helena (speaker).**

2016. Dance knowledge in dancers' stories about their learning to dance (paper presentation); 10 July. Retzhof, Austria: 29<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology. <<http://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:38664>>. (2017 May 3.)