A choreological analysis of Pina Bausch’s “Le Sacre du Printemps”: the nexial connection of the strands of the dance medium

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**INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATION**

The “Rite of Spring” (1974) by Pina Bausch and Tanztheater Wuppertal generally applies to the contemporary choreographies and is at the same time regarded as an icon of modern dance. In the piece Bausch focuses on the ritual of choosing and the sacrifice of a woman. It contains a large number of historical reference points and a variety of different scientific and theoretical contextualization.

The book “Methoden der Tanzwissenschaft. Modellanalysen zu Pina Bausch’s ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’” (translated: Methods of Dance Studies. Model analysis of Pina Bausch’s ‘The Rite of Spring’) is a collection of different scientific methodological approaches to movement and dance, which are then linked to Pina Bausch's choreography of "Le Sacre du Printemps". The interdisciplinary anthology provides a holistic view of the available methodological research related to movement and dance; the different trends and developments influencing the field and perspectives and insights from the fields of educational media analysis, performance analysis, movement and body analysis, ethnography and video analysis. The book aims to initiate a discourse on the methods of dance research, but unfortunately leaves the methods of choreological studies out of the equation. An essay by Antja Kennedy (p.85) provides an interesting point of view in relation to choreological studies and contemporary developments in the field of Rudolf Laban’s movement principles: Kennedy illustrates the systematic procedure of the Laban/Bartenieff movement analysis (LBBS) by making use of selected passages from “The Rite of Spring”.

The LBBS and choreological studies have developed out of and beyond the seminal research of Rudolf Laban, but both perspectives must be distinguished from one another. Kennedy’s movement analysis is presented through examples of phrase, motif and style analyses on a micro level. It presents the most dominant effort qualities of the phrases performed by the women in the group. Consequently, this paper will not present an analysis on micro-level of “Sacre”, but instead will give an overview of the most noticeable choreological aspects on a macro-level and how these result in creating meaning for the piece as a whole.

While studying Bausch’s version of “Le Sacre du Printemps”, which I will refer to as “Sacre” in this paper, I noticed the unlimited possibilities of investigation. However, this written document aims to add to the existing research and is not intended to repeat LBBS or other methods derived from the book “Methods of Dance Studies”. Accordingly, this paper focuses on the analysis of the nexial connection of the strands of the dance medium¹ ‘Sacre’, drawing attention to the understanding of choreographic choices.

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¹ Preston-Dunlop (1998) generalize that the dance medium contains: performer-movement-sound-space. The nexus and sub-strands are the various ways in which the strands interweave and signify
I have pursued an analysis of a video recording of a performance. I have not watched the live performance of this choreography. This analysis and examples is based on what is seen on Video link (1): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUfj3vGo4n4

In addition I would like to mention that my interest for this subject started in 2013, when dance companies celebrated the 100th anniversary of “Sacre”. The ballet premiered at Paris’ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 29, 1913 and ended in in a riot. The composition of Igor Stravinsky and the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky were too unconventional: Nijinsky had brought the sacrificial dance to life through his choreography, presenting the dancers with turned in feet, heavily weighted movements, and angular and sharp body positions (video link 2). Already after the first 75 counts, the public was infuriated and loudly criticized the performance. This led to my initial curiosity about the history of the piece and, subsequently, to a research study during my ‘art of education’ master. In order to add to the piece's historical context presented in my master thesis, this paper will examine the piece in terms of choreography and its historical and cultural significance, thereby completing my research on this subject.

THE INTEGRATED NEXIAL CONNECTION OF MOVEMENT AND SOUND

Bausch’s choreography follows the section of the music. A woman lies on the floor on a red dress, downstage to the left. As the bassoon solo begins individuals and small groups of women start running out on stage with a light effort quality and in different spatial orientations within the general space. At the same time other instrumental solos are introduced in the music as well (1:20-1:57). Another interesting example is the section from 12:54 to 14:45 minutes. The alternation of strings and wind instruments is embodied through the alternation of movements of the women (strings) and the men (wind instruments) in groups. This is also an aspect of the integrated nexial connection of performer and sound, which I will explain later on in this paper. Once the selection of the ‘Chosen One’ has been made the corps of dancers precisely follows the rhythm of the music (28:08-29:58). When the music moves into a new section, the performers often freeze their movement actions (17:12) and wait until the new musical section has begun. They then proceed changing their movement actions in terms of effort quality according to the rhythm. Thus, the audience hears the music change while at the same time seeing these changes reflected in the movements on stage. This results in a theatrical flair and emotionally charged movements. In order to avoid becoming predictable, Bausch plays with the contrasts in stillness versus movement by, for example, metrically embodying pulsing movements when the music is rhythmically uneven (4:13-5:33).

2 The video that I analyzed was produced for television; therefore, the dancers are not always all visible due to editing and different camera shots
THE INTEGRATED NEXIAL CONNECTION OF SOUND AND COSTUME

The Tanztheater Wuppertal contains approximately 25 dancers of which half are women and half are men. The choreography uses a mixture of pedestrian movements like running, falling and stomping, based on ballet and Ausdruckstanz movements. The stage is covered with brown earth and in terms of scenography is already an attraction by itself. The women wear skin colored slips, and the men are bare-chested and wear black pants. The only presence of color on stage is that of a red scarf which is worn as a red slip by the ‘Chosen One’ during the final or ‘sacrificial’ dance. When the music volume increases, movement actions, often combined with a clear direct spatial projection in relation to the scarf, increase as well (22:19-22:35). When there is a music change in rhythm or melody (for example 3:43, 4:13, 6:49), the attention is drawn back to the scarf, thereby emphasizing not only its presence but also its ‘corporeality’ and significance: it probably functions symbolically as a forecast of the eventual ritual sacrifice (11:17). Its use in the overall choreography results in a combination of semiotic and phenomenological content, inciting meanings that emerge from the interaction of the strands movement-sound-costume.

GENDER ROLES & THE INTEGRATED NEXIAL CONNECTION OF PERFORMER AND SOUND

The choreography is exaggeratedly gender-specific: men and women are characterized differently through the spatial and rhythmic qualities: movements of the women are embodied, as Laban called “Passion and Mobile Drive” (Laban, R. von & Lawrence, F.C., 1947) with sudden and free effort qualities in a more inwardly directed and concave posture with peripheral pathways. Along with the often diagonally facing down- or upwards spatial projections, the women seem more desperate than domineering. This indicates a sense of fear, weakness and compliancy to me. In contrast, the men make use of ‘action drive’ with clear outwardly directed, strong and sudden impacts with central pathways in the kinesphere. These different movement qualities of both gender roles are present in for example 12:53-15:32). Here the labeled female and male qualities of Laban’s effort graph become visible; the gender-specific costumes increase the femininity of the women and the maleness of the men.

Bausch clearly distinguishes male and female gender roles through specific groups of instruments: the women are mostly accompanied by strings and woodwind instruments, while the men are mainly accompanied by brass instruments, a contrabassoon or a timpani (12:53-15:32).

The spatial displacement of both genders as well as their physical interaction is also characteristic for the gender division: The interpersonal relationship between the women is embodied with light and sustained ‘near to’ and ‘sliding touch’ elements (22:53-24:27). They
lead each other gently by the hand or lightly clasp other women's shoulders, thereby depicting solidarity and support. Female-male physical interactions are more complex and give a clear image of the relationship and role of each female and male in “Sacre”. More often the touches and support of the women's weight is forceful and grabbing-wise, which can be described as extremely aggressive and dominant (8:32). An example of this can be found in minutes 25:58 to 26:16, where the women jump on the shoulders of the men into a curved body design, straddling their waists around the men and slashing their limbs about the male bodies. In my opinion this dynamic nuance highlights the motions as being sexual and ritualistic. In the scene preceding the aforementioned example, the ‘Chosen One’ is perceived by the spectator for the first time (24:34). Bausch created this closed sign through an increased touch of the men's hands on both upper arms of the women, which is supported by the integrated sound as well. An interesting point of view is that the males seem unfeeling and lifeless, with no purpose in attacking the women; they incorporate more isolated body actions instead of fluent and natural movements. The straight body designs evoke an expectant and supportive posture before the women jump on their shoulders. After watching the scene twice I noticed that the men are doing the same supportive movement once more, however, this time without the women (26:03). It seems like they are going through the motions in a mechanical and already expected way. Here the question came up of which role of the man in society Bausch is seeking to illustrate.

**CHOREOLOGICAL ORDER IN THE STRAND MOVEMENT**

Preston-Dunlop says: “The balance of spatial opposite also contributes to the choreological order.” (2010, p.65) This order becomes visible straight away in the opening scene, where spatial balance is illustrated through the use of opposed primary directions and dimensions of movement (0:48-3.40). Laban called it ‘harmonic’ and ‘natural’. Another harmonic choreological order (Preston-Dunlop, 2010, p.64; Laban, ’1966: 4) is embodied through opposed dynamic qualities on macro-level: Almost every scene consists of a smaller quantity of dancers (usually an individual or small group) and a large ensemble. The dynamic qualities of the group are contrasted with those of the individual by using different rhythms, thereby creating visual contradiction. For example in 5:06-5.33: The female group moves synchronized in different directions with bounded and sudden impacts while a female soloist is highlighted by the alternation of non-metric impulses, resulting in a quality of free flow. The balance of spatial and dynamic opposition is most specifically highlighted in the final section when the ‘Chosen One’ is isolated from the group through spatial setting and movement quality (30:03-35:07). Laban wrote: “One of the basic experiences of the dynamics of movement is that its different spatial nuances always show clearly distinguishable mental and emotional attitudes.” (Laban,1966,p.27). She repeats fragments of movements that have
already been introduced and danced by the group. Between each fragment the action of walking is supported with indirect and free flow qualities but also with strong and bounded gestures. Together with the integrated sound and the spatial nuances I get the feeling of a desperate and destructive emotion. These combinations function like a summary of how time has progressed throughout the piece. The audience recognizes these fragments but also sees how their purpose has been altered to contribute the ‘Chosen One’s’ sacrificial dance to the death. This could be interpreted as a process of sacrificial rite and its history as a whole. The ensemble lines the stage behind her, walking sustained whilst facing the solo female. It seems like the group is become more observer than performer; their lack of movement creates the contrast that emphasizes the desperate nature of the sacrificial dance.

**CONCLUSION**

Through my analysis of Bausch’s choreography, I discovered that the methods she used are less complex as I had initially expected. The most dominant nexial connection is visible in the high levels of integration in terms of movement and sound. When Bausch uses immediate repetition of a movement phrase, she usually places the movement outside the present musically rhythmic groupings – we see the same phrase and hear the same melodies, but the movement overlaps the structure of the music to show that the sections are not separated. This produces a different rhythmic emphasis each time the dancers repeat their phrases and creates a new way for the audience to “see” the rhythms in the music and watching the narrative. In addition, the choreological order within the strand of ‘movement’ also affects the embodiment of the score, emotional content and theatrical flair. All strands are highly interdependent, with each strand following into the next rather than simply trying to keep up with the music. In my opinion this interlacement, the nexial connection of the strands results in a meaningful relationship and a phenomenal visual experience. The constantly moving variation of the interlacement is not used in a literal manner and thereby supports the definition of a ritual. These shifts create a dramaturgy of tensions and transforming it into a phenomenal spectacle which is simply non-standard and suspenseful.
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