

## Editorial Comment

In this issue of JASHM, we are pleased to present readers with an informative discussion that arose in response to an article entitled "Meaning in Dance," originally published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (Carr 1997). Immediately following the republication of Carr's article we include two critical responses: one from David Best whose philosophical work is central to Carr's argument, and one from Drid Williams whose critical comments present an anthropological perspective. Readers will find that a wide variety of issues pertinent to the anthropology of human movement find clarification in the discussion.

### The Shift from Function to Meaning

From an anthropological perspective one is immediately struck by the impoverished notion of anthropology presented in Carr's paper. From the outset, he reveals that he is uninformed as to what might constitute an adequate account of dance in current anthropological research. In his opening paragraph, for example, readers will notice that he reduces an anthropological perspective to an interest in "the role of dance in human affairs" and separates this from "how dances themselves mean as potential bearers of communicable sense." Such a functionalist view of "dance," although typical of anthropological writing in the 1930's and 40's, was long ago superceded by a shift from 'function' to 'meaning' (see Crick 1976). For example, typical of a functionalist account is Margaret Mead's (1928) description of the dances of Samoan adolescents which she regarded as a vehicle for psychological adjustment. For Ruth Benedict (1934) the function of the entire Kwakiutl Winter ceremonial (a series of religious rites) was to rehabilitate the individual back into society. Similar interpretations can be found in the ethnographic writings of British functionalists such as Malinowski (1922), Firth (1936) and Radcliffe-Brown (1913). In such descriptions, actual body movement is epiphenomenal and ritual actions and dancing are described in terms of adaptive responses either to the social, the psychological or the physical environment (see discussion in Williams 1991: 117-150). Although ethnological studies of dance that began with the work of Kurath maintained an allegiance to functionalism long after it had been abandoned by mainstream anthropology (e.g. Kurath 1960, Rust 1969), it can no longer be said to constitute a paradigm for research or explanation in anthropology.

The shift from function to meaning in the early 70's led to a concern with questions of 'how dances themselves mean as potential bearers of communicable sense,' (Carr's second "level" of consideration, see p. 59). This has been a central part of anthropological enquiry into human movement systems. The shift is evident in the pioneering work of Kaeppler and Williams, both of whom completed their doctoral dissertations at this time (see Kaeppler 1967;

Williams 1975). While disciplinary boundaries between philosophical aesthetics/semantic theory and anthropology are certainly likely to produce radically different answers to such questions, the questions themselves cannot be said to divide along neat disciplinary lines in the manner that Carr wants. In any case, Carr separates them only in order to put them together again for the purposes of his argument, although nowhere in the paper does he come back to this issue nor explain what he means by "forms of human practice" if this is different from functionalism.

### 'Interpretive' versus 'Instrumental'?

The discussion also highlights problems that can arise if we fall into the dualist trap of separating the 'symbolic' from the 'instrumental' when talking about human action. Carr inadvertently does this when he misinterprets Best's use of the term "interpretative reasoning" and places it in opposition to "more instrumental forms of reflection and enquiry." Carr sets up a dichotomy between propositional knowledge (meaningful) and skills (meaningless) that is exactly the opposite of Best's intentions.

Dividing forms of reasoning into 'interpretive' and 'instrumental' is just as problematic as dividing forms of action into 'symbolic' and 'instrumental'. Like spoken discourses, action signs are simultaneously imbued with both aspects and these are best conceived as differences in pragmatic and semantic function rather than differences in kind or types (see Jakobson 1960, Friedrich 1986 for discussion of vocal poetics). Since all human actions are part of complex socially constructed ways of using the body, given the biological possibilities and constraints afforded our species, even the most mundane practical activities take on symbolic aspects (in the sense of making meaning) when situated in their cultural contexts. Williams raises a number of important questions about the symbolic/instrumental dualism when she specifies the problem this way:

How is one to deal, for example, with the movements of, say, a yam farmer in the Cameroon? Yam planting is preeminently practical and instrumental, but what are we to do with the bits of sacred potash or herbs dropped into the mounds and/or ritual which may precede or follow the planting? (see Ardener 1973). To the farmer all these actions may form a structural whole. The actions may not constitute a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'symbolic' actions at all. Yet, how many times are they described in this way, as if the western categorical distinction were also a part of the folk model of the actions? And yet another example: what is one to do with the movements in the Roman Catholic Mass, all of which can be performed by anyone, and all of which (excepting one) are 'instrumental' actions, i.e., taking distributing, breaking and pouring. 'Blessing' is the problematic action to the investigator who starts with a dichotomy between instrumental and symbolic or practical and artistic actions, or something of the kind. And how does one explain the so called 'everyday' movements when they are incorporated into a ritual or a dance? (Williams 1991:242).

The central point here can be summarized as follows: we preclude the possibility of understanding indigenous categories and classifications if we unwittingly apply Western categories such as a dichotomy between symbolic and instrumental, as a means to distinguish modes of thought or modes of action. Best's criticism of Carr's misreading makes it clear that the dichotomy creates untenable divisions even within Western thinking.

It would seem to be the case that Carr provides us with an example of what Best has elsewhere called "the disease of the dichotomous mind." Tied to a dualistic mode of reasoning Carr appears unable to recognize Best's position as one that offers a completely different conception, a third alternative. This is reminiscent of those who, upon recognizing that Wittgenstein's work could not be called cognitive in the neo-Cartesian sense, chose to dismiss it as behaviorist (see Harré and Gillet 1994). They failed to grasp that a radically different conception of person and agency was being formulated than that offered by the traditional Cartesian conception of person with its attendant and highly problematic dualisms (e.g. mind/body; rational/emotional; verbal/non-verbal etc).

### The Critical Responses: Best and Williams

Best addresses several important misconceptions of his own work that appear in Carr's paper, including the extremely puzzling (and unsubstantiated) inference that Best is, in fact, a closet empiricist or logical positivist. Best also discusses Carr's assumption that he refers to 'metaphor' when he writes about meaning, and the related misconception that artistic meaning is necessarily metaphorical.

Ethnographic research on human movement has shown that human action is frequently metaphorical outside of artistic contexts—for example, in the gestural actions signs that accompany or replace speech during social interaction (see Farnell 1996). This means that artistic meaning cannot be distinguished on such grounds. Even if that were *not* the case, however, to limit strategies for meaning-making irrevocably to figurative tropes *per se*, or worse, to just one variety of trope, is highly reductionist.

Best also reminds us not only to avoid the conflation of the aesthetic with the artistic but also that Western classifications of human movement systems such as "purposive sports" and "aesthetic sports" cannot always be distinguished in terms of the presence or lack of competition.

Williams's commentary specifically addresses points raised by Carr on pages 70-71. She provides ethnographic examples to illustrate how, from an semasiological perspective, the position that Carr takes—that smiles, hugs,

handshakes and other mundane actions have meaning “at a primitive level” and that they are “parasitic upon linguistic meaning”—is highly problematic. This teaches us that how an investigator conceives of the relationship between action and spoken language has important consequences for his/her conceptions and interpretations of action.

Brenda Farnell  
Editor

### References Cited:

**Benedict, Ruth**

1934. *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

**Carr, David**

1997. Meaning in Dance. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 37(4), October.

**Crick, Malcolm**

1976. *Explorations in Language and Meaning: Towards a Semantic Anthropology*. New York: Halstead Press.

**Farnell, Brenda**

1996. Metaphors We Move by. *Visual Anthropology* 8 (2-4): 311-335.

**Firth, Raymond**

1965 (1936). *We, The Tikopia*. Boston: Beacon Press.

**Friedrich, Paul**

1986. Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy: A Reformulation of Sapir's Position. In *The Language Parallax*, pp. 16-53. Austin: University of Texas Press.

**Harré, Rom and Grant Gillett**

1994. *The Discursive Mind*. London, New Delhi: Sage.

**Jacobson, Roman**

1960. Linguistics and Poetics. In *Style in Language*. T. Sebeok, ed. Pp. 350-377. Cambridge: MIT Press.

**Kaeppler, Adrienne**

1967. *The Structure of Tongan Dance*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Hawaii.

**Kurath, Gertrude**

1960. Panorama of Dance Ethnology. *Current Anthropology* 1(3): 233-254.

**Malinowski, Bronislaw**

1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Mead, Margaret**

1959 (1928). *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: Mentor Books.

**Radcliffe-Brown, A.R.**

1964 (1913). *The Andaman Islanders*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

**Rust, Francis**

1969. *Dance in Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Williams, Drid**

1975. *The Role of Movement in Selected Symbolic Systems*. D. Phil., Oxford University.

1991. *Ten Lecture on Theories of the Dance*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.