

## EDITORIAL COMMENTS

### A Problem

Asked to write Editorial Comments for this issue of JASHM, I realized that the papers are all very good, and that once having said that, what else could I say? Then, too, my mind was full of a problem concerning the dance and aesthetics for a short essay (1200 words) meant for a new *Encyclopedia of Africa*. The subject is as large as the African continent, and I was stuck on the relationship between "artistic" and "aesthetic" — there being no commonly used distinction made between "artistic" ("meaning," "purpose," "insights") and "aesthetic" ("elegance," "beauty," "ugliness," "tragic," "humorous" etc.). A colleague, David Best, wrote extensively on the subject, so I let him state the problem:

The source of the confusion is the vague, unquestioned assumption of a general metaphysical 'aesthetic', which is supposed to be instantiated in both natural phenomena and works of art. It seems to be metaphysical because it is difficult to discover anyone who offers even remotely credible *reasons* for accepting this supposed general aesthetic faculty, attitude, kind of experience etc. Indeed, most theorists offer no reasons at all. It is merely a vague underlying assumption. Even the rare theorists who have recognised that there must be a distinction have not drawn it adequately (Best 1982: 357 – italics added).

He also says that

It is assumed that there is a general underlying metaphysical 'aesthetic', which is instantiated in both artistic and aesthetic experience. This vague assumption is usually taken to imply some sort of unspecified aesthetic *unity*. To repeat, rarely are any *reasons* given in favour of it, despite its implausibility. A unified 'aesthetic' is simply, and remarkably generally, assumed (*Ibid.* 257-8 – italics added).

Best's emphasis on assumptions led me to reread the contributions in this issue. Sure enough, the first sentence in Farnell's "Rethinking" paper opens with the statement of an assumption: "It is widely *assumed* that sign languages are secondary semiotic phenomena that only come into being when deafness prevents the normal acquisition of a spoken language" (this issue, page 211).

I then looked at the beginning of Grau's "Tiwi" paper. On page 189 (third paragraph), we find, "It is interesting that, from a dance perspective, the ethnocentricity of the body and of bodily actions is often ignored, even today when the basic *assumption* that there is no such a thing as a natural body given to us by nature, but rather that the body is shaped, constrained and even invented by society is *de rigueur*. Dancers and dance researchers accustomed to working within Western settings somehow rarely question their *assumption* that they can understand all dancing bodies, even when these are foreign to them."

In the "Norwegian" paper, I didn't find the words 'assume' and 'assumption', but think I can safely say that Grimsbø and Engelsrud want to break down the *assumption* that physical fitness is always and everywhere a "good thing" never having possible deleterious effects.

### Grau

The words 'assume' and 'assumption' are taken from the Latin word, *assumere*, which means 'to take', 'to adopt', 'to accept'. That is, assumptions are statements, ideas or beliefs that are accepted as true *without clear proof* and/or *without presenting arguments* to support them.

Grau has to deal, not only with on-going assumptions about 'bodies', but also with the assumption that all dancing bodies can be understood in the same or similar ways. Not only that, she has to get across to readers what "her people" (the Tiwi) think; what constitutes their ideas of 'bodies', 'aesthetics', and much more. What makes Grau's ethnography excellent is the subtlety and skill with which she gets to an elemental premise of Tiwi aesthetics: "The vertical spine connects the human body to the trees with their clear lines once the grass has been burnt after the rainy season and it is this very clarity of line which is at the heart of Tiwi aesthetics" (page 191).

In fact, the deeper one gets into Grau's paper, the more one is led to understand the Tiwi point of view instead of seeing the Tiwi 'through a glass darkly'— the 'glass' consisting of *our* customary beliefs, ideas and values. This is one of the highest ideals of anthropological ethnography — to leave readers feeling that they clearly understand some aspect(s) of a culture different from their own. Another ideal of anthropological ethnography is stated simply as 'comparison'. Grau has managed to compare features of a Western dance form (ballet) with Aboriginal dancing without either form of dancing being a 'loser'. Grau does a superb job and I hope readers will enjoy the essay as much as I did.

### Farnell

Like Grau, Farnell has to deal with assumptions about 'language', 'mind' and commonly used negative terminology with regard to her subject, i.e. "non-verbal," "natural," "non-rational," "real," when dealing with the metaphysics of body/mind relationships, but she is equally skillful and subtle in her approach to her subject as is Grau. For example, she uses Plains Indian Sign Talk [PST] as a kind of 'lens' (the integrated vocal/visual-kinetic linguistic practices of PST) through which readers can see Nakota and American gestural practices in new and different ways (page 213).

Reading Farnell's work, I am constantly reminded of an important work on the indexical structure of visibility:

The term "action sign system" is very apt. ...signification is an action and so must be located in time and space. The defining properties of meaningful action are precisely those not visible in a grammatical-semantic model, the units and rules of which are essentially timeless. ...The creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships: people enact their selves to each other in words, movements, and other modes of action. All selves are culturally defined, as time and space themselves are culturally defined. Time and space are never simply there; they are continually cut to fit the agenda of the moment (Urciuoli 1995: 189).

And, Farnell is literate with respect to movement, therefore the evidence she provides regarding her argument about the nature of sign language is

unambiguous, and, I venture to say, irrefutable. One is left with a clear picture of the differences between English speakers and Nakota speakers and their gestural spaces. We realize that “linguistic practices are not verbal utterances located internal to the mind, and, at best, supported (or, as is sometimes supposed, contradicted) by non-verbal outward behaviors of the body, but rather dynamically embodied signifying acts that simultaneously integrate vocal signs and action signs, both of which constitute ‘talking’” (page 227). Farnell has done a splendid job, and again, I hope readers derive as much pleasure from reading her work as I do.

### Grimsbø and Engelsrud

The “fitness practices” essay provides insights into another culture (urban Norway) and into the kinds of “societal demands for doing exercise” with which we are all familiar. We discover that “Exercising thus plays a central part in women’s self-acceptance and self-esteem” (page 223).

Often, it is the cultural practice that everyone takes for granted that remains *unexamined*, but Grimsbø and Engelsrud do not allow readers to enjoy such complacency. Is our penchant for exercise always a “good thing”? Are ubiquitous advertising, moral admonishment and such, always truthful? Do we derive an adequate picture of what is really going on? What does it mean if the notion that “softness is dangerous” is widely accepted?

These Norwegian writers provide a lively overview of these questions that was informed by anthropology’s Mary Douglas’s notions about purity/impurity (see page 231). They have done an excellent job of examining cultural assumptions, especially so, since English is their second language. Enjoy!

### Review Essay

There is a sense in which Farnell’s review of *Language and Gesture*, edited by David McNeill (page 239ff), is connected with some of the issues dealt with in her essay, for example,

To say “language and gesture are integral parts of a whole,” in fact, separates language from gesture, and is not the same as regarding gestures “as part of language itself” (page 9). This lack of clarity glosses over some important theoretical differences among the authors that the editor either misses or chooses to dismiss (this issue, page 243).

And, speaking of the editor of the volume, one would have to say that he seems to pretend that certain important distinctions between anthropology and psychology do not exist, which is why Farnell’s review presents readers with more than a standard book review. It is also an overview, especially of contributions socio-cultural anthropology has made to the study of gestures. In agreement with my original theme, in this review, Farnell has had to deal with assumptions made by the editor and some of the writers represented in the book.

I personally found the review author's opening argument about technology and theory interesting, especially because the notion of *writing movement* could be said to be the most important technological innovation that emerged in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, McNeill's collection provides an "interesting [interdisciplinary] cross section of current approaches to the topic of gesture and its relationships to spoken language" (page 240), and although it is flawed in some places, it is certainly well worth reading.

Drid Williams, Senior Editor

**References Cited:**

**Best, David**

1982. *Philosophy*, Vol. 57: 357-72.

**Urciuoli, Bonnie**

1995. The Indexical Structure of Invisibility. In *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance* (Ed. B. Farnell). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, pp. 189-215.