

BALLROOM DANCE AS A COMMODITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

Ballroom dance as it is taught in studio settings in American society is classified as a commodity and is thus legitimately seen as part of a complicated system of social and material exchanges that mainly operate in the economic realm. What has been traditionally viewed as a ritualized system of human actions and a leisure activity in this society has acquired over the last century some of the forms and symbolism existing in the wider economy and has come to be governed by, and subject to, the same principles that govern the rest of the market.

This investigation is an attempt at a cultural analysis of ballroom dance as it is conceived as a commodity in the most famous of American ballroom dance studios, the Arthur Murray Schools of Dance.¹ In particular, I am concerned with the underlying system of symbolic action and cultural values that is embedded in the production and packaging of the activity of ballroom dancing. My rationale for investigating the symbolic dimension of this form of dance by analyzing it as an object of exchange is more complicated than, but can be summarized by, a statement made by Sahlins that in Western culture the economy is the main site of symbolic production (1976:211).

The Arthur Murray organization is viewed here as an institution which is a site of symbolic production. Arthur Murray, Inc. (hereafter referred to as AM), with its affiliated schools, is the largest educational institution of ballroom dance in the world. It produces and distributes a system of organization and teaching that has had such extensive influence that its name has become synonymous with ballroom dancing in the United States, and many independent schools have used that system as a model for their own operations. If the dance lessons and standards of ballroom dance are part of the 'goods' that are produced, then this network of schools is one of the major producers and transmitters of this system of human symbolic action.

The data for this investigation was primarily based on my involvement with the AM school in Hartford, Connecticut, from 1978 to 1980 in the role of dance teacher. My association has also included visits to studios in Springfield, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Yonkers, New York; and New York City. Even though the AM brand of ballroom dance will be the focus of this investigation, it must be understood that it is only one of the offerings of this form of dance on the market. Parks and recreation facilities, adult education programs, freelance teachers, nightclub owners, and other studios offer classes as well. Each of them creates different manifestations of social dance by combining some of the same symbols employed by AM with others of their own.

In 1980 there were approximately 350 AM schools in eight countries: the United States, Canada, England, Germany, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Puerto Rico. The actual number of studios fluctuates annually as new studios open and others go out of operation.² These commercial dance studios are individually owned and operated under a franchise agreement with AM, whose central office is in Coral Gables, Florida. While differences exist from school to school, under the

franchise agreement several common features are shared because franchisees are subject to a certain degree of continuing control over their operations by the franchisor and are required to meet stipulated standards of quality. In return, the franchisees are given access to, and the use of, standardized products and services, operation standards and manuals, proved marketing plans and strategies, uniform symbols and trademarks, and a distinctive business appearance. Thus the parent organization is able to present a certain consistent image to the public through the schools regardless of the specific geographic location of the studio or the individual tastes of managers.

This concern with a public image emerges out of commercial interests and is consciously developed and presented to the consumer. The intention is to present both a professional mode of operation and a sophisticated appearance of a style-setter. The image is created (i) in the use of refined marketing, organizational and sales techniques; (ii) in the way the physical plant is designed and decorated; (iii) in the choice of music used for dancing and (iv) in the appearance and manner of the staff. The production of this image is re-created every day in the studio such that it becomes akin to a social performance that can be analyzed and understood as an example of the kinds of social performance discussed by Goffman (1959) which occur in many American business establishments that provide products and services to the public. The physical plant of the school can also be understood as a 'Goffmanesque' setting for that performance, with "fixed sign" equipment and 'front' and 'back' regions.

A consciously developed image is further projected by the school in advertising campaigns conducted for the purpose of procuring new students. Sources of potential students are generated from major media campaigns, invitations to guests of students and individual recruitment by teachers. Although AM schools of dance are private institutions, they are open to anyone who will pay for lessons and who will conduct themselves within the parameters of this consciously created image.

The people involved in AM schools assume various roles: owner, manager, salesperson, teacher, student or customer and the like. Without going into a detailed description of each category, it can be assumed that AM studios have acquired the forms of social organization that predominate in the wider American business culture. The role categories are defined in terms of the functions, responsibilities and authority that each holds in the school. Distinctions exist between management, labor and consumer that are typical of many business organizations of this scale in this society.

Although some of the staff members and some of the students develop long-term relationships, most of them did not know each other prior to their participation in the studio, and many do not maintain contact once they have left. While at the school, these individuals -- now grouped under the term, 'dancers' -- form an association around the activity they all hold in common: ballroom dancing. It is an association that is created more by choice than it is by kinship ties, national origins, ethnic backgrounds or social status.³ Each studio population can be viewed as part of a larger group of ballroom dancers who share a common body language.

That which holds a group of dancers together at AM schools of dance is a highly structured and complicated system of shared meanings. For the purposes of this discussion, it can be viewed as two integrated systems linked into one: the first is the body language of ballroom dancing with its defined units of human movement and associated role-rule relations. The second is a sub-set of Western cultural values and symbols which have been associated with the produced 'goods'. Both sets of shared meanings are objectified and manifest themselves in the products and services offered at the schools.

When a student decides to study at an AM studio, he or she enrolls in an individually prepared course of instruction and a formal contract is negotiated and subsequently signed. The selling and teaching of ballroom dancing at this material level is commonly understood as an exchange of dance lessons for cash. Programs are translated into dollar values in the following way: first, a 'progress chart' is planned for each student. Specific dances are chosen from the entire curriculum, the standard at which they are to be taught is specified, and the school figures to be learned in each dance are listed. A 'school figure' is a technical term for a step pattern in which a particular element or group of elements of a dance is highlighted. Each has a name and a specific way that it must be executed. School figures in ballroom dancing can be usefully compared to those in the competitive sport of figure skating. Next, the chart is translated into a block of hours of dance instruction. The four elements of each school figure (i.e. foot position, rhythm-timing, lead/follow cues and styling techniques) are allotted an estimated unit of clock time based on the number of private instruction hours needed for them to be taught and mastered. Total time allocations are then made both for each dance and the entire program. In addition to private instruction, a course may include group lessons, practice parties and individual practice time at the studio. Finally, by multiplying the total hour allotment by a pre-determined hourly rate, the translation of dance lessons into dollar values is completed.⁴

At this material level the object of exchange is conceived in terms of hours of instruction and step patterns. Dance step patterns, like clock-time, do not have the same kind of material substance as, say, fine mats or necklaces, but they are reified to the extent that they are treated as if they did. For example, a student may ask of a teacher, "Give me a few steps so that I will feel (or look) like I know what I am doing on the dance floor". The creation of such concrete distinctions between step patterns is partially produced through the practice of giving names to them. Each component of a step pattern and every permutation and combination of them in the step manuals is named. Through this device, constituent differences among moves are signified, and each takes on an independent identity. Although treated as if they had the same concreteness as a can of peas, the dance steps are somewhat more elusive by nature. One studio owner, among those to whom I spoke, recognized the intangible nature of his 'product'. He could not overstate the importance of 'progress charts', which are the only tangible things that students have as a record of their accomplishments and progress on a week-to-week basis.

For an anthropologist of human movement the object of exchange is understood as the knowledge of the body language -- the system of human symbolic actions -- and the step patterns are only one part of this complex entity. Step patterns are not viewed solely as material objects, but as complex relations of constituted values and role-rule relations. Like clock-time and cash systems, they are the material manifestations of socially-constructed, conceptual structures. Further examination of the form of this body language would require independent consideration and in future will form the topic of another paper. For now, it is important to understand that even at this apparently practical and concrete level of exchange, the 'concreteness' is already socially and conceptually structured.

How it is that ballroom dancing is translated into dollar values only begins to explain how it is conceived as a commodity. From the perspectives of many producers and consumers, the principle underlying these exchanges can be described by Sahlins's notion of the "rational ordering power of gain" (1976:167). That is, the market economy for them is an area of pragmatic action and is experienced in utilitarian terms. On the surface this process appears as one of material maximization: the now famous allocation of scarce means among the alternative ends to obtain the greatest possible satisfaction.

Teachers and managers of AM studios generally judge the success of what they do by a practical logic of whether it works, or 'sells'. But conceiving of the production and distribution of goods solely from their pecuniary qualities, one ignores the cultural code of concrete properties governing utility and remains unable to account for what is in fact produced. What is left is the impression that production is merely the result of an enlightened rationality, given that one accepts the premise that production is merely the result of the rational ordering power of gain. Stephenson and Iaccarino report a conversation that leaves just such an impression: at the 1885 convention of the American Society of Professors of Dancing in New York City, two teachers were discussing a new dance called the 'college polka'. "I don't like the slide", remarked one. "No", agreed the other, "but it sells; there's no doubt of that" (Stephenson and Iaccarino, 1980:38).

For students of AM schools, the interest in material maximization is vaguely understood as the returns in 'utility', or social assets, that are the results of their monetary disbursements. It is common sales knowledge, of course, that the value of dance lessons must be established in the student's mind. Lessons must have some preferred utility, real or imagined, but always imaginable to someone. In ballroom dance literature and in popular "how-to-dance" books, these utilitarian values are called "benefits" that people are meant to get from dancing and such values are given as the reasons why people dance. Arthur Murray (while certainly not the first to do so) stressed these social assets (or 'benefits') in his advertising campaigns and sales procedures so as to further emphasize what dance lessons could do for people. These benefits range from having more fun out of life, to gaining more poise, confidence and popularity; from exercise, relaxation, and business reasons, to the enhancement or development of one's personality.

At a cultural level what is revealed here is this society's preoccupation with the concepts that (a) almost any activity or object can be analyzed, measured and compared to something else in terms of its costs and benefits, and (b) one should always seek advantage over loss. This 'accounting' orientation towards life is fundamental to the larger ordering structures of the market economy and the culture that surrounds it.

The appeal of a product in this culture consists in its created image of functional superiority over all available alternatives. Consumers are willing to pay more if they are convinced that they are getting more. Stuart Ross, a former AM teacher, reported that the impression had been successfully created that no studios were as well fitted to give dance instruction as those bearing the Murray name (Ross, 1946:29). In 1979 the studio in Hartford, Connecticut still claimed that reputation. Even though at some level we know that such claims for superiority may be fraudulent, it only adds further evidence to the organizing principle of 'gain' that underlies all these exchanges.

For the individual studio, interest in material advantage takes the form of added monetary value, and AM studios command 'top dollar' for lessons in the industry. The following list summarizes the products and services available at AM studios:

1. The curriculum, the foundation of which is divided into Bronze, Silver and Gold standards.
2. Certificates, medals and trophies awarded for achievement and progress through the standards.
3. A unique method of teaching that employs a concept of 'components'.
4. Individual lessons with professionally trained teachers as well as group classes.
5. A lavish service of individual attention that is consciously given to students, called 'Cadillac Treatment'.
6. Physical plants that are tastefully, if not extravagantly, decorated.
7. Additional promised benefits that can be attained through learning to dance; the 'social assets' referred to above.
8. Various intra-, and inter-school sales promotions and competitions where prizes are awarded.
9. Periodic studio-sponsored parties and events.

Each of these products and services can be viewed in terms of its culturally constituted, practical value to a student:

1. Specific learning goals can be pursued, either for the purpose of learning to dance socially and/or in choreographed routines.

2. Certificates of achievement that resemble academic diplomas are awarded to those who successfully complete their programs and graduation balls are held annually by each studio to recognize and honor in a formal way those students who have attained the various levels of achievement.
3. The difficulties inherent in learning are minimized. The system of pedagogy is very formalized and organized around the presentation of school figures, which are further analyzed into their component parts.
4. Learning (as advertised) is fast and effective, and AM teachers are given the image of expert managers of learning.
5. The individual attention given to students makes them feel like 'very important persons'.
6. The physical plant is both attractive and a comfortable place to visit.
7. The benefits have been enumerated above.
8. Contests can be entered for those with competitive inclinations.
9. Weekly or bi-monthly parties give people an opportunity to use what they have learned and provide a ready-made social life to join.

It is general anthropological knowledge, however, that these kinds of practical values cannot be understood on the natural level of needs and wants. The social meaning of an object that makes it useful to a certain category of persons is no more apparent from its physical properties than is the value that it may be assigned in an exchange (Saussure, 1966:115).⁵ It must be stressed that 'utility' is not merely the quality of an object, but is rather the social significance of the objective qualities. The larger ordering structure is therefore understood in terms of the cultural meaning of those needs. It is the meaningful system that defines functionality, according to the particular structure and finalities of the cultural order (Sahlins, 1976:206).

The production of ballroom dance as an object of exchange is seen to be based on something more than the practical logic of material effectiveness; something other than 'pure' utility. Sahlins suggests that production is a functional moment in a cultural structure, and it is the symbolic logic rather than the material logic that organizes demand. This logic of production appears to be a differential logic of cultural meanings. Viewed in this way, the rational production for gain can be understood, at the same time, as a production of symbols (Sahlins, 1976:215). To produce ballroom dancing and dances as objects of exchange is to associate and to endow it and them with certain significant cultural symbols and meanings. From this standpoint, AM endowed its product with certain cultural symbols and choreographed events so as to create a unique 'brand' of ballroom dance. Looking at four aspects of the product will make the point more clear.

First, the system of Medal Standards and the accompanying step manuals produced by AM are the foundations of the curriculum. The underlying logic of their structure is based on socially conceived distinctions between what is simple and complex; between what is beginning and advanced. For example, in the Social Standards,⁶ the Bronze Medalist Standards represent a level of competency which provides the foundations for and mastery of skills for a life-time of general social dancing. Silver Medalist Standards offer the aspiring dancer more complicated patterns and styling techniques. These patterns are more oriented towards exhibition and competition because of the more exaggerated gestures used and the larger amounts of space needed to perform them. 'Gold', 'Gold Bar' and 'Gold Star' represent the highest and most challenging standards of social dancing offered by AM. While step patterns in these levels may be danced socially, because of the time and effort needed to learn these skills, they are taught more often to hobbyists and for competition and exhibition routines.

From a cultural perspective, the ordering of these standards is understood not just from 'less' to 'more' in a numerical sense, but also in terms of what is better. The namesakes of 'bronze', 'silver' and 'gold' are applied as metaphors. The medals themselves are symbols that indicate standards of increasing value, and they are also endowed with cultural values pertaining to personal advancement, progress and competition.

Second, an important feature of ballroom dancing consists in the skill with which the dances are performed. The performative properties of 'smoothness' and 'gracefulness' are set in opposition to 'awkwardness' and 'clumsiness'. This scale of differences in skill levels has been used to create additional possibilities for dance programs in some studios. For instance, one marketing plan distinguishes between three methods of product presentation: referred to as 'three-point', 'six-point', and 'twenty-eight-point' teaching, each of which is offered in succession to students. The logic behind these methods is that the greater the number of 'points' or elements learned, the more the refinement and sophistication in execution of danced patterns. Again, more is better.

Teachers are instructed that students must be acquainted with and experience the concrete differences between these three methods. Consequently there is a direct impact on what material is taught and when. From a purely pecuniary perspective, it is believed that if the value of these concrete differences is established between studio and student, then the more elements into which a step pattern can be divided, the more the teaching time that can be justified, and the larger the course that can be sold. The usage made of such distinctions exemplifies another point made by Sahlins: in the creation of new products in Western economy, every conceivable and meaningful distinction of society is put to the service of another declension of objects (1976:215).

Third, the AM brand of customer service is also given a differentiated meaning by calling it "Cadillac Treatment". Using the word, 'Cadillac' (a

cultural metaphor for material wealth and status), identifies this service with the symbol of the best that has been preferred by the middle classes in American society. Lavish individual attention and tastefully decorated physical plants also serve to create the surroundings for events that are significantly weighted with symbolic elements generally associated with preferential treatment given to the economic elite of a consumer society. In other areas of the economy it is known as 'VIP' treatment and can be found, among other places, in the better restaurants and hotels of Western culture.

Finally, beside learning to dance socially students may be encouraged by staff to learn choreographed routines. These offer the excitement of competition and exhibition which are considered to be expressions of the highest levels of achievement in social dancing. Those who participate in this aspect of studio life are members of a sub-group who are regarded as the more serious students within the larger ballroom dance community. Competitions and contests are not limited to the activity of dancing alone, but pervade most aspects of studio life.

A 'games' or agonistic model of events underlies the studio's entire annual cycle of events. This becomes readily apparent in the organization of promotional events sponsored by the parent company. Although too complicated to discuss in detail here, the prevalence of the cultural value of competition associated with these forms of dancing is important to appreciate. Competition is associated both with the dancing itself and with the marketing orientation of the wider economy in which social dance is but one commodity.

In sum, the process of production of this brand of ballroom dance is viewed in this investigation as a process of symbolization, one that involves the creation of new permutations of structured relationships between groups of extant cultural signs and symbols. The utilitarian values associated with the products and services, as well as the body language itself are manifestations of culturally-constituted, conceptual structures.

The genius of Arthur Murray regarding his contribution to ballroom dancing might be said to have originated in his capacity to integrate two sign-systems into an object of exchange -- dance lessons. One sign system is the set of elements and role-rule relations that comprises the body language, ballroom dancing. The second system is a sub-set of relevant cultural values that he associated with the product that he intended to sell. What has been called his "keen eye...and good business sense" (McDonagh, 1979:61) can be more fully understood in this context as Murray's sensitivity to the latent correspondences in the cultural order, where conjunction in a product-symbol spelled mercantile success. Just as a fashion designer does not create his or her collections out of cloth alone, Murray did not create his choreography or products in a vacuum. His ability to manipulate the body language of ballroom dancing, to create versions of new dances and revisions of existing ones set him apart and put him on the leading edge of the field as a choreographer. He did not create ballroom dancing, but through his successful treatment of it as a commodity, starting with a mail-order business, he turned dance lessons into commercial properties and developed a multi-million dollar business.

Like Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur, he used bits and pieces that already possessed social and symbolic significance to create an 'object' that worked (1966:16-30). What 'works' in American society is what sells. Like the true bricoleur, Murray remained within the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization and worked by means of signs, constantly on the look-out for cultural 'messages'. Furthermore, Sahlins suggests that the product that reaches its destined market constitutes an objectification of a cultural category and that a bricoleur objectively synthesizes in his product a relation between cultural categories, for in that lies its saleability (Sahlins, 1976:217).

I would want to suggest that it is in the light of these notions that we can best understand, from a cultural and anthropological perspective, how and in what ways ballroom dances are commodities in AM studios and in modern American consumer society.

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NOTES

1. Technically, the term 'studio' refers to the room where the dancing itself occurs, and the term 'school' refers to the larger institutional framework. In this context, however, these terms will be used interchangeably.
2. In 1982, the AM corporation reported 254 operational studios, and in 1983, they reported 425.
3. Although no specific group of people is explicitly excluded, in practice, the studio population tends to be middle and upper-middle-class in both economic and social status.
4. The hourly rate is pre-determined by the owner of the studio and is set within a price range established by the corporation.
5. Saussure suggested that the principle that governs all values appears to be the comparison of similar and dissimilar elements that have been joined in a system (1966:115). The content (or meaning) of a word or coin -- and in this case a system of human actions -- is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside of it (See also Williams, 1976:128-129). Only in being part of a system is an object of exchange endowed with value and significance.
6. The 'Social Standards' represent Murray's version of the American style of ballroom dancing that has emerged since the end of the nineteenth century. Fourteen dances are included in these standards. This style can be contrasted to the Continental or English style of ballroom dancing which has been modernized since 1920.

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